Mujeres de Corcovado: self-representation through design

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April 2018

A Field Practicum Report submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Sustainable Practice Degree at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, FL USA.

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“No one knows everything and no one knows nothing; no one educates anyone, no one educates himself alone; people educate each other, mediated by world and history.”

Paulo Freire
Acknowledgements

Costa Rica
I want to thank Dinnia, Rebeca, Shirley, Yeiny, Verónica, Estefanny, Ana, María, Nidia, Jessica, Joneci and María Esther—Mujeres de Corcovado—for their effort, input and commitment. They were the soul of the project, and without their engagement, none of it would have been possible. Thank you to the children that participated, and to Daniela for taking care of them. Thanks to Jessica, Verónica and Jose from Germinar: for providing solidary housing and sharing their space for the women’s circle. To ASCONA, for being the host organization, lending us their library space and materials to work with. To RedESS for bringing in their knowledge on solidarity economies and inviting the women to their Second National Encounter. To GuanaRed and Natalia Vargas for supporting the project and facilitating the women’s circle, a vital strand of this weave. To Loida Pretis from the Ministry of Culture for providing feedback on the project and sharing her ideas. To Ofelina, Eusebio and other members of the Ngäbe community in Alto Laguna, for their selfless effort and support. I want to thank Carmen for being my friend, companion and the producer of the project: establishing connections with other organizations and institutions, and bringing many great ideas to the table. To my parents and sister for always supporting what I do.

University of Florida
To María, committee chair and friend, for many fruitful conversations: always providing encouraging feedback, and expressing thorough involvement and interest. To Marianne for her continued support and important feedback throughout the project, and Gaby for her important input in the graphic design of this report and the visual communication materials developed. To Glenn and Andy for supporting my ideas and interests throughout the MDP program. Thank you to the College of Liberal Arts and the MDP program for financing this work, and Art Depot in Costa Rica for being a sponsor. I also want to thank the School of Art + Art History's Graphic Design program, the College of the Arts and UF Graduate School for supporting the diffusion of this work abroad.

And last, I want to acknowledge the Fulbright program, sponsored by the Institute of International Education, for giving me the opportunity to devote myself to this Master's program, thanks to their generous support.
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Abstract

This report describes my capstone project, the Field Practicum (FP), a requirement for the Master of Arts in Sustainable Development Practice (MDP). My field practicum consisted of a pilot phase of a participatory research and design curriculum with artisan collectives that have low access to digital technologies and consulting services. The curriculum was designed into a toolkit, composed of methodologies, techniques, materials, tools, and strategies which can be flexibly combined with the aim of aiding artisan collectives/associations to use their knowledge to co-create meaningful branding with each other. In this phase, the toolkit was co-curated with the participants into a set of workshops and experiences (mainly attending markets and events). It was implemented in Puerto Jiménez, Costa Rica, with the artisan group Mujeres de Corcovado. Themes related to gender and solidarity economies were integrated throughout the curriculum, providing opportunities for participants to interact and reflect about how these topics relate to their work, and to share their experiences with community workers belonging to the solidarity economy and communal feminisms movements in Costa Rica.

Throughout the project, participants learned to create illustrations and prints relevant to them, and applied them to their products. They collaboratively improved their products by exchanging services and sharing knowledge. The experiences derived from interacting with the methods and assignments sparked awareness on subjects beyond product design that influence their artisanal endeavors, such as gender dynamics and central valley-ism (dependence of rural towns on knowledge and material resources propagated outwards from the central valley, where the main cities are located).

**Key words:** participatory design, branding, gender, tourism, free/popular education, economy, and markets.
Introduction

Since the structural adjustment of programs implemented by Costa Rican administrations during the 1980s, an increasing focus on direct foreign investment and international trade has led the country to open its economy to globalized markets, reducing production subsidies and trade barriers. This, along with other measures like a reduction in social spending, has caused the economic expansion of some businesses, and the increasing impoverishment of a majority of small entrepreneurs who do not have the resources to compete economically with imports (Lizano et al 2007). Along with recurrent economic crises leading to widespread unemployment, these factors have caused many informal productive activities to flourish (Estado de la Nacion 2016). Artisanal endeavors have expanded, especially in rural areas that are focused on tourism (which creates a market for souvenirs and crafts). Artisanal endeavors in the Costa Rican context are generally low-tech, have low start-up costs and have little to no access to formal credit (Estado de la Nacion 2016). Formal public education has also progressively deteriorated, mainly due to an overall reduction in social spending, one of the mandates of neoliberal ideology. In Costa Rica and Latin America, informal/popular education in both rural and urban communities, advocated by social movements, has become a key component that contributes to the empowerment and agency of organized communal life and the regeneration of social fabric, while contesting official development strategies (Jara 2014). I studied product design in Costa Rica, where I became increasingly interested in artisanal design and craft. The fact that we still value handmade products, despite industrial mass production, fascinates me. Over the years I had many conversations with faculty, colleagues, artisans, and people in rural communities, and I developed the notion that artisans do not see themselves as designers, even though they are, in many cases, designing their products. I also became increasingly involved with grassroots social movements through my work with local grassroots organization ASCONA (see page 16) in the Osa Peninsula, where I lived and worked in 2016 as the coordinator of the Integral Program of Arts and Culture of the Osa Peninsula (PICA, in Spanish). During this time I worked as a community organizer, and was able to build relationships with national networks working around social justice issues and informal education as a tool for political mobilization. This fundamentally influenced my view of the role of designers, and how we can use design as a lever for social transformation and emancipatory processes. My values, therefore, are reflected in the framework of this project and the tools and methods that supported this work.
As a designer, I am interested in exploring the relationship between design, popular education, and autonomy. I find participatory communication design to be a fertile area for the exploration of these intersections. Participatory design can potentially democratize decision-making, decentralize resources, and enable creative platforms for bottom-up cultural production (Carey 2011). Branding is an important part of communication design. It originates from the business world but is increasingly used outside of corporate contexts. Branding seeks to build awareness and connect emotionally with the audience of a given product or service (Wheeler 2013). Overall, it increases the value of a product or service because it communicates meaning, values, and purpose to potential users. Branding is an essential tool for any initiative that seeks to communicate something to the public, be it an entrepreneurial initiative, an institution, or a grassroots social organization. It is used to market products, but is not limited to this. A social organization that holds free workshops in its community also needs to brand itself to effectively communicate with its audience, even if it operates outside the market. Therefore, seeing participatory branding as a way of enabling the identity construction of a group or individual that offers a product or service (not necessarily market-oriented) is important because it constitutes an expression of self-representation and participatory cultural production.

**Audience**

This report is useful for designers that are interested in carrying out social impact work, but also for development practitioners in general. Working with people implies leaving the office or studio and engaging in a process of constant learning. It implies respecting the people that you will be working with, as they are the experts when it comes to their own lived experiences. Assuming that we know very little when we encounter a new place is a healthy practice both for designers and practitioners alike. All too often, we have parachuted into communities, performed our “expert services” and left, failing to create meaningful processes that self-sustain after our collaboration ends. More importantly, we have many times failed to identify existing communal processes, organizational structures and goals that we can support, instead of intending to create them based on our preconceived notions.

Designwise, this report represents an interesting case study, where design research and popular education methods are combined with creative methods to generate visual content while stimulating critical thinking and collaboration in participants. I chose these methods because they best reflect my values, and they are just one of an infinite possibility of options to address my guiding question. This said, I think that the reflections sparked by this experience make a strong case for the importance of learning to listen to the people that we are working with, and also trying to understand where they are coming from, while being transparent about our own values and beliefs as designers. Our own aesthetic principles and priorities might be challenged by contexts that are unfamiliar to us, and we must learn to detach from them if necessary. However listening is not enough. This report also presents some concrete examples about how plans can, and must, change, based on feedback gathered throughout the process by participants. Methods and tools used can be transformed, and schedules adjusted to fit the time and needs of participants: this greatly enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of a project. I argue that social impact designers and development practitioners need to be good listeners with a flexible mindset. Facilitating alliances with other organizations doing work in other areas that can further help participants reach their goals is also key.
Justification

Why design?

Design is an interesting word, because it is both a verb and a noun. Design can refer to a process of designing, or to an outcome, as in “I like your designs.” You can use design to visually communicate values to an audience through a variety of digital and non-digital media - this is what branding is essentially about. However, in recent years, there is an increasing interest in the design process. This means that design is decreasingly being evaluated by how much you are selling, or how good the layout or technique of a designed product is. It is also decreasingly relying on the creative genius of an individual to be considered successful. Instead, the social interactions fostered by a designed process, product or platform, are receiving increasing attention, as they might create more meaningful change in the long run. In the same way, collective design, or co-design, is drawing increasing attention because, as systems theory explains, the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Artisans need branding to represent their work and communicate who they are to their audience. Logos, labels and brand names are some of the most basic required elements of a branding system. Artisan associations in Costa Rica are mostly constituted by women, who are often burdened with unpaid domestic labor (house work and taking care of our families), and thus establish small revenue-generating initiatives at home (INAMU 2015). Start-up costs are low because they do not need to invest in expensive technical equipment. Like many informal associations, they lack the capital to access services that can improve the quality of their products and the functioning of their businesses, such as branding, tools for research and experimentation, product design and accounting. I graduated as a product designer from Veritas University in Costa Rica. My increasing interest in the artisanal sector led me to have many conversations over the years with faculty, design students and artisans. Over time, I developed the notion that artisans do not feel like designers even though they are, in many cases, designing their own products. Furthermore, design is a service that, if not out of reach, requires the reliance on charity-based consultancies by government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This creates a problematic power dynamic, where beneficiaries feel that they have to accept the branding solutions offered, because they are free. This, to my opinion, causes dependency instead of empowerment. Because the processes are only superficially participatory (in the best cases artisans are involved in brainstorming and sketching their identities,
but the technical task of creating the branding ultimately relies on designer consultants), the results all too often do not convey the essence of the products, and they are also static solutions that are unable to be iteratively improved and adapted to change. Relying on “free” but restricted services creates dependency, while the exclusive use of digital technologies for graphic design and marketing make these unattainable for many rural and urban artisans who do not have access to computers and/or design software and limited to no internet.

Furthermore, I argue that these services don’t increase the capacity of artisans to self-represent and communicate visually about themselves and their environments. As creators and artists, artisans should be enabled, if they wish, to create their own graphic identities using the wealth of resources (material, cultural, social and biological), that make them and their products unique. They are the primary experts when it comes to assessing their own experience and defining their essence as creators. The ability of artisans to self-represent might lead to more meaningful content and create increased ownership of their visual identity(ies). This will increase their agency, which I define as the capacity to make their own decisions, choose what to communicate about themselves, and how. More meaningful branding content will also create opportunities for them to influence their economies by increasing their commercial exchanges while relying on their own creativity.

In light of the issues described, I argue that participatory design must move towards creating and distributing contextually appropriate tools for design, research and development, that artisan communities can appropriate, adapt and use creatively and sustainably over time, relying on their own assets/capacities. Exploring and embarking on communal self-financing models, and fostering local solidary economic circuits, are additional ways in which we can think about reducing dependency on government or charity funds, which at any time can be reduced or cut off temporarily due to the unstable nature of the macro-economy. Collaboratively thinking about ways in which artisans interact with their socio-natural worlds, instead of portraying them as isolated actors, is key to fostering networks of equitable interdependence.

FIGURE 1

Mural and base for coffee brewer designed by Shirley Méndez, woodworker from the Osa Peninsula and member of Mujeres de Corcovado.
Problem statement

Problems

- How do I create a process for artisans to develop their own visual identities and support their personal/professional aspirations?

- How can this process be sustainable, given the context that we are working in?

Considerations

I think that the most fundamental aspect of sustainability of any project is its ability to insert itself in ongoing processes, and strengthening or complementing these. It is important to never think of a project as complete or finished, but rather as a link in a network of ongoing processes that will continue when the implementation time ends. Incorporating this consideration into this project’s framework can facilitate continuity, as well as future project phases to build upon this one.

Another key aspect of sustainability is engaging participants in a meaningful way, so that their opinions are taken into consideration, while embarking collaboratively in a constant process of readjustment and improvement of the content, methodologies and tools used. This means not only providing spaces for opinions to be voiced, but actually acting upon them immediately, where possible. Working in alliance with more organizations and stakeholders can bring in diverse perspectives and enrich the content of the project, and create or strengthen mutual support networks that make the processes more viable in the long term.

Last, when I talk about sustainability, I also like to think about the ability of a process to self-sustain financially and environmentally. Financial sustainability refers to the capacity of participants to self-finance the tools and materials that they need to keep exercising the methodologies learned. Process sustainability refers to the capacity of participants to self-replicate the process and use the methodologies imparted independently. Environmental sustainability refers to the environmental impact of the materials used to create branding (e.g. paints, inks, paper).
Scope/delimitations of project

This project is intended as a pilot phase or first approach to creating participatory educational and creative experiences that can be replicated and expanded upon in future phases. It is one of many possible approaches to the problems described. I worked with ten artisan women in Puerto Jiménez whose experiences had been shaped by living in Costa Rican rurality; they felt a strong identification with the communal feminisms and solidarity economies frameworks, which influenced the content of the curriculum. Due to the limited project implementation time (three months), self-financing models and other operational approaches to the practice of solidarity economies could not be delved into. Many additional important topics could not be covered (see Further Directions).

Puerto Jiménez is located in the Osa Peninsula, on the Southern Pacific region of Costa Rica. I chose to work here because of my familiarity with this place and its communities, being a Costa Rican and having previously lived in Puerto Jiménez for six months, working with local and official organizations throughout the Osa Peninsula. This gave me an increased understanding of the context, while I had built trust with many members of the community. My host organization was the Puerto Jiménez-based Asociación de Servicio Comunitario Nacional y Ambiental (ASCONA), with whom I had worked for six months before starting the Master in Sustainable Development Practice program at UF. During this time, we forged new relationships with two national networks: the Costa Rican Network of Social and Solidarity Economy (Red de Economía Social Solidaria Costa Rica aka RedESS), and GuanaRed, a national network of artists/communal activists. They agreed to support this project and bring in their perspectives on local economies and grassroots feminisms, by facilitating two workshops on these topics.

Notes on communal feminisms and solidarity economies

Communal feminisms is a Latin American social movement that is concerned with addressing the issues of rural women, especially indigenous women. They explore the relationship between territorial sovereignty and sovereignty over the body, creating activist grassroots support networks that explore the ways in which the global capitalist system creates multiple forms of violence against bodies and the earth (Cabnal 2010). Solidarity economies is a social movement, defined by Pablo Guerra as a set of economic practices grounded on solidarity values (Guerra 2012, 73), concerned with the administration of common patrimony in order to provide human beings a dignified existence. The underlying social rationale driving solidarity economic systems is different from capitalist economics in that it is centered around the reproduction of life (human and non-human) instead of the accumulation of capital.
Background

The Osa Peninsula

Mainly rural in territory, the Osa Peninsula is considered one of the most remote areas of Costa Rica. It has a relatively small area of 700 square miles, and a total population of approximately 13 000 (INDER 2011). The main towns are Puerto Jiménez, Golfito, Sierpe, La Palma, Rancho Quemado, Carate and Bahía Drake. It is one of the most forested areas in the country, protected through the creation of two national parks (Corcovado and Piedras Blancas), wildlife refuges and mixed reserves. Corcovado National Park is one of the main economic drivers of the region, being catalogued by National Geographic as “the most biologically intense place on Earth”; the Osa Peninsula alone contains 2.5% of the world’s biodiversity (Rosero-Bixby 2002) in a very small area. There are an estimated 4,000–5,000 plant, 700 timber, 124 mammals, 375 bird, and 71 reptile species, and over 8000 documented insect species (Rosero-Bixby 2002). Rural ecological tourism is one of the main economic activities of the inhabitants. Other economic activities are artisanal gold mining and fishing, sport fishing, hunting, logging, palm oil extraction, and teak plantations.
People with very diverse backgrounds and ethnicities inhabit the Osa Peninsula. There are 3,570 indigenous inhabitants (INDER, 2011) of four main groups: Ngäbe, Huetar, Cabécar and Bribrí. There are also migrants from the Central Valley, from the Northern Pacific, and many Panamanian descendants. With the rise of tourism since the 1980s, many foreigners (mainly from the U.S. and Europe) have also settled in the region. This makes for a rich mix of traditions in the area, with a predominance of the Christian religion (INDER 2011).

Tourism is the main socioeconomic driver in the area (INDER 2011) and has occasioned the transition of livelihoods dependent on agricultural production into the services sector. Many people in rural areas (especially, but not limited to, women) have turned to crafts making as an opportunity to tap into the tourism market. After local markets were inundated with cheaper, imported products, people who made a living crafting utilitarian objects have also modified their products to suit what they consider to be the taste of foreign tourists. This raises a debate on the effects of tourism, especially around the issue of the commodification of local culture and the disruption of local economies. Cole (2007) argues that the question of whether a community has lost authenticity should be defined by none other than the community in question, rather than being classified by outsiders, as this is a form of cultural domination (telling “the other” what they should be). “Who has the right, authority, or power to define what is authentic?” (Cole 2007, 946). I agree with this argument; however, it fails to consider power dynamics behind economic forces, that inherently shift local notions of what is “authentic” or “desirable”. Arguing that while in some cases the commodification of culture has resulted in the disempowerment of marginal communities, Cole notes, in other circumstances cultural commodification has provided marginal people with a new identity and political resources, and in some cases, this has led to empowerment. While it is beyond the scope of my research to find out if, and in which cases, this is true in Osa, I acknowledged and kept these issues in mind when designing the project. I planned to find out what the artisans thought of local markets versus the tourism market, and how they dealt with the low tourism season.
Communities empowering each other

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) points out the capacity of popular education methodologies to balance existing power asymmetries and contribute to the dissolution of class structures (Freire 2000). Popular education is both a philosophy and a political activity, with goals that go beyond the transmission of knowledge. It implies different ways of organizing, communicating and managing conflict, in societies on a macro level, and in small grassroots organizations or households on the micro level. Sociocracia (Freitas 2016) is a work that compiles experiences of horizontal organizational structures and democratic decision-making processes on a communal level. This resulted from collaborations of different actors belonging to social movements in South America participating in think tanks and sharing their ideas and experiences. These were synthesized by Freitas in an “intellectual toolkit” for autonomous and democratic organization and decision-making processes to be used by Latin American social organizations.

Social movements have encouraged informal/popular education in both rural and urban communities. This has become a key component that contributes to the empowerment and agency of organized communal life and regeneration of social fabric (Jara 2014). Relying often times on knowledge sharing and the recovery of ancestral and pre-capitalist production practices (valuing assets from a non-market perspective like local knowledge, affection, culture and the environment), they have been important in reestablishing confidence in the capacity of communities to self-organize and achieve their desired livelihoods. At the same time, this has led to a resistance of many grassroots-led productive initiatives to formalize and integrate into the global economy. The Ministry of Culture in Costa Rica has created a new program in 2015 (Puntos de Cultura, or Culture hotspots), modeled on a successful Latin American program propagated in 2004-2010 by Celio Turino, Brazil’s Secretary of Cultural Citizenship, part of the Ministry of Culture. Puntos de Cultura transfers resources to grassroots organizations so that they autonomously manage and implement cultural projects, build networks throughout the country and access and share each other’s knowledge and resources (Dirección de Cultura 2016). The aim is to create and strengthen collaborative relationships between social organizations, that surpass the implementation span of their projects. It was as coordinator of a Puntos de Cultura fund for Puerto Jiménez-based NGO ASCONA (Asociacion Ambiental de Servicio Comunitario Nacional y Ambiental) that I first interacted with grassroots social movements and started learning from their educational practices. Since then, I have attended many encounters and workshops organized by national networks like GuanaRed, a Costa Rican network of cultural grassroots activists. Laura Varela, a social worker and member of the network, analyzes in her thesis (Varela 2015) the structure and working philosophy of GuanaRed. GuanaRed uses the Four Toltec Agreements (Ruiz 1997) as a working philosophy to regulate human interactions. They have also developed tools based on their experiences to better deal with conflict in social organizations, recognizing that conflict and division are the reason why many well-intentioned projects and organizations fail. Their educational philosophy emphasizes experiential learning through play, on the precept that collective play leads to co-creation of new knowledge which is internalized by participants in a more meaningful and effective way, because it generates bonds between participants (Varela 2015).

Solidarity economies

The solidarity economy movement in Costa Rica was born out of small productive initiatives, supported by academics and activists who had a critical stance towards neoliberalism. Organizations adhering to Solidarity Economy (SE) have cooperative and redistributive qualities, while they seek to administer their resources through inclusive and democratic decision-making processes. A compilation of oral and written testimonies of women involved with Solidarity Economy initiatives throughout Central America shows how women are the backbone of solidarity economy experiences, because we have been socially programmed to care for our family and redistribute resources when administrating our households (Voces Nuestras 2014). Solidary exchanges of goods and services occur in many grassroots
networks like GuanaRed (Varela 2015), where participants exchange knowledge (through imparting workshops for each other), food, and seeds during gatherings, and establish periodical exchange tables (mesas de trueque, in Spanish) for artisans and producers. A mesa de trueque is a space where products and services are exchanged using local currencies and alternative values for pricing of products.

Another important precedent is Coopevictoria, a cooperative established in Grecia since 1943 that has successfully implemented the use of an alternative currency called UDI (Unidad de Intercambio Solidario). Some authors, like Gatica 2012, classify the SSE system entities into productive initiatives, supportive entities (organizations supporting the former by providing financial services e.g. Empresas de Crédito Comunal, capacity-building or technology transfer, and networks or integration initiatives (Gatica 2012). In this report I will refer to the supportive entities as communal self-finance models. This SSE initiative exists, despite of, and marginalized by, the Política Nacional de Emprendimiento 2010-2014 (a national public policy to encourage entrepreneurial activities), which according to analyses by Gatica, only benefits export-oriented sectors, meaning that almost one-third of emerging businesses cannot access these benefits (Gatica 2012, 9). Another interesting finding is that, in his 2012 study, two out of three SSE/SE initiatives were located in rural areas (Gatica 2012). This might indicate that, being poorer and economically excluded, rural areas provide more incentives to practice and invent alternative economic models. The current national policy on entrepreneurship emphasizes the importance of building differentiated financing strategies for the entrepreneurial sector, especially for micro enterprises. Environmental sustainability is mentioned as a desirable value which should be promoted, but there is no specification regarding the ways in which the policy will effect change in this sense.

There is an evident emphasis on supporting information and technology-based endeavors, but the small agricultural and artisanal sectors are excluded. Cultural entrepreneurs are not mentioned in this policy.

Frequent criticisms on solidarity economies are the lack of mathematical formulations to predict and model the behavior of these systems. Critics perceive SSE as a compilation of best practices and ethical values with limited impact in the economic system as a whole (Gatica 2012). I perceive this criticism as somewhat narrow-sighted, because it sees the economy as a discipline which reduces life to a set of equations and simulations, while failing to acknowledge that economics is first and foremost the study of how we produce, what we produce and the ways in which we distribute to satisfy humankind, and that human initiatives to do this are diverse and unpredictable.

A solidarity economy perspective in this project was facilitated by RedESS, who provided a workshop (see p.29), input and ideas in the planning phase, and an invitation for two artisans to participate in the Second National Encounter of Solidarity Economies, organized in Puntarenas (Central Pacific coast).
Communal Feminisms

The majority of informal endeavors in Costa Rica are led by women (Estado de la Nación 2016). Societal gender structures lead to less women being able to access formal education and employment, and thus they seek livelihood strategies in the informal economy to sustain their families. In 2015, there were a total of 371,191 (formal and informal) businesses, 65% of them led by men and 35% by women. However, when looking only at informal businesses, 56% of these belong to women and only 29% to men (Estado de la Nación, 2015).

Formalization requires the payment of taxes and social benefits that many endeavors led by women cannot sustain, because they have additional responsibilities of domestic labor, considered externalities in mainstream economics. This means that a significant portion of their time is dedicated to activities that are not remunerated, in contrast with most of their male counterparts, who can dedicate themselves fully to their businesses and thus tend to grow a larger financial capital. A study developed by Petry and Gayle in 2016 with recipients of Emprende, a governmental project in collaboration with the European Union which funded 950 rural, women-led entrepreneurship initiatives, concluded that 76% of the women had one or more dependents, and more than half participated in the care economy without receiving remuneration, limiting the time that they devoted to their businesses and resulting in stagnation (Estado de la Nación 2016).

The gender situation in Costa Rica is dealt with through a number of lenses. Official gender analyses include the independent, government-funded program Estado de La Nación (State of the Nation), an interdisciplinary diagnosis of the advances and challenges (economic, environmental and social) of Costa Rican society published on a yearly basis. The most recent mentions of gender were related to inequality in ownership of land (Estado de la Nación 2016, 100), and income inequality. INAMU, or the Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (National Institute of Women) provided a more in-depth analysis. They published a document called Estado de los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres en Costa Rica (State of Women’s Rights in Costa Rica), most recently in 2015, in which they recommended, among other things, 1) developing more effective communication and consciousness-raising campaigns to change value-systems and cultures that promote machismo; 2) developing better methodologies to measure the role of household work in the economy so that data can be gathered as a basis for new policies that better distribute domestic work between men and women; and 3) reformulating entrepreneurship incentives to facilitate the inclusion of women in the formal sector.

Communal feminism is a recent (early 2000s) social movement that is concerned with addressing the issues of rural Latin American women, especially first nation women, who face different issues than urban women. Their proponents draw the connections between development models based on the extraction of natural resources (through agriculture, mining, and logging, for example), environmental injustice and gender based violence, as both cause and effect of structural violence perpetuated by colonial nation-states (Cabnal 2001). Communal feminists have been creating national and transnational networks, participating in politics, resisting extractivist projects, holding workshops and discussions in communities, carrying out women’s circles, festivals and gatherings, to name a few of their activities. Among their many aims are revitalizing the ideal of the sacred feminine, and exploring the effects of colonization on both male and female bodies and territories (Cabnal 2010), acknowledging that women and girls suffer disproportionately from sexual violence and aggression.
The “official” feminisms are criticized by the grassroots and communal feminists as an expression of Western dominance, generalizing women’s issues seen from an urban, middle class perspective, where the desirability of women’s inclusion into free market society isn’t questioned, while the right to autonomy and alternative ways of organizing society is ignored. These feminisms do not explore and take into account feminist perspectives from rural and indigenous women. These issues often overlap with systemic issues of environmental justice, state violence and forced displacement (Cabnal 2010). Feminisms are as diverse as the situations that women face according to their ethnicity, social position and geographical location. The work of Tzk’at, (Red de Sanadoras Ancestrales del Feminismo Comunitario), a Guatemalan network of ancestral healers, has greatly influenced rural feminist activism in Costa Rica. Its members have been invited many times to hold talks and workshops in Costa Rican universities and grassroots events, enabling a rich dialogue, and the adoption of communal feminisms methodologies learned during the workshops. According to communal feminism advocates, violence against women equates to violence against the feminine; violence against women who take care of their territory, violence against the sacred feminine in ancient cosmovisions (world views); and violence against Mother Earth in extractive activities and capitalist ideology (Cabnal 2007).

A gender perspective was incorporated through the use of a visual time-tracking tool (see Web of Life, p. 26), which allowed participants to reflect on the activities to which they were allocating their time. Mapping conflict and domestic work served as entry points to initiate interesting reflections on their situation as rural women and gender roles. Furthermore, a women’s circle (see page 27) was facilitated by Natalia Vargas, social worker belonging to GuanaRed. She has worked within the communal feminisms movement for some years now and has adopted practices and methodologies learned in communal feminist facilitation workshops, e.g. with Lorena Cabnal, Maya-Xinka Guatemalan activist.

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**FIGURE 5**

Postcard handed out during the women’s circle that we held (p. 28). On the front: Illustration depicting many elements of the communal feminisms movement: its close relation to territorial sovereignty, the influence of indigenous cosmovisions in the relationship to nature and the rights of children. On the back: poem/mantra.

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Tengo derecho a decir no quiero,
Tengo derecho a decir no me gusta,
Tengo derecho a decir no tengo ganas,
Tengo derecho a protestar por los abusos,
Tengo derecho a luchar por lo que quiero,
Tengo derecho a no someterme,
Tengo derecho a ser inconforme,
Tengo derecho a defender mi territorio
Tengo derecho a defender a mis hijos e hijas
Tengo derecho a decidir sobre mi cuerpo
Tengo derecho a amar,
Tengo derecho a ser amada,
Tengo derecho a cometer errores,
Tengo derecho a a tolerar mis olvidos,
Tengo derecho a equivocarme,
Tengo derecho a librarme de las culpas.
Tengo derecho a disfrutar

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**MUJERES LUCHARDO Cuerpos y Territorios Libres**
Participatory Design and co-creation

Participatory design uses an extensive amount of design thinking research methods to obtain valuable information about users or customers of a product or service (Martin & Hanington, 2012). This systems-driven thinking was originally inspired by the potential to provide new value to consumers, revolutionizing customer-business relationships and thus securing a competitive advantage in the company’s respective industry. A traditional, market-oriented paradigm of competition is the logic that drives these research processes. This is possibly why the majority of participatory design literature is also produced in the context of the business world and refers to its use by corporations. “Emerging landscapes of design” (Sanders 2006) are presented as a response to customer demands for products and services that better respond and adapt to their changing needs and circumstances. C. K. Prahalad and Venkat Ramaswamy are usually given credit for bringing co-creation to the minds of those in the business community with the 2004 publication of their book, *The Future of Competition: Co-Creating Unique Value with Customers* (Sanders 2006).

On the other hand, more and more initiatives are emerging in which participatory design is defined as having a vital role in democratizing decision-making processes, decentralizing knowledge and enabling creative platforms for participatory cultural production. Carey & Piers (2017) criticize the role of graphic design in indigenous artisan communities, when implementing designers ignore the social, cultural and environmental context in which these communities are embedded. They propose the need for “the development of a respectful equality of mutual cultural knowledge as a working method for designers, regardless of their cultural power” (Carey and Piers 2017, 56), in this way setting the stage for a new style of branding, providing an interesting example of a social marketing campaign in which local graphic design symbols are used as tools for visual communication about AIDS to Zulu people in South Africa. Sherry Blankenship (2005) explores the potential of design as a tool for the sustainability of cultural diversity (as opposed to the unifying trends of globalization) by “reflecting and representing the respective peoples and places in which it is working—by defining and dispersing itself in many locations rather than perpetuating its present predominantly Western centrality” (Blankenship 2005, 24). An important subject on which she touches is the centrality of building cultural self-esteem through design (Blankenship 2005, 25): she presents this as a vital component for the empowerment and reassertion of communities around the world. This statement resonates with me, and is in line with the idea that communication is a human right: the right to self-expression includes visual communication.

There are many levels of co-creation, on a spectrum of less to more involvement on behalf of participants. Ezio Manzini distinguishes between diffuse design (performed by everybody) and expert design (performed by those who have been trained as designers). In his book *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Manzini 2015), the author explores several case studies where trained designers trigger and support meaningful social changes, focusing on emerging forms of collaboration such as co-design. To my understanding, the highest level of co-creation means that the distinction between producers and users, and between experts and laypeople, disappears. Designers/participants explore tools and creative methods that can make the group or person that is being designed for, become directly involved in creating representative content. These tools and creative methods have to be suitable for the context in which we are working, and be replicable beyond the scope of implementation of the project, so that participants can continue to develop their work after the project ends. It is important to note that this level of co-creation is not always appropriate, and should only be undertaken when participants want to become fully immersed in the creation of their own designs and graphic content.
Previous design initiatives with artisans in Costa Rica

The Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Learning Institute) provides free courses for artisans, on topics like woodworking, sewing, product design, screen printing, and prototyping. The Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (Costa Rican Tourism Institute) has imparted courses on resin figure modelling, woodworking and other design topics, providing participants with a brand name, labels and business cards, targeting the tourism markets. These institutions have a more traditional view of entrepreneurship, promoting competition and raised productivity as goals. Most of the courses are offered in the Central Valley (Gran Area Metropolitana), while in rural areas, courses are dependent on the availability of resources to transfer professors and materials from the Central Valley.

The Ministry of Culture (MCJ) and the National Institute for Women (INAMU) also have programs to work with artisans. The former is promoting collaborations between artisans and designers to encourage innovation and create new products with shared value. The Ministry of Culture organizes events and platforms to market and sell these products in the Central Valley, where the main cities are located.

INAMU started a project in 2015 called Producto con Identidad (Product with Identity), in which women artisans around the country were invited to participate. The project is subdivided by regions, where artisans are selected based on their motivation and financial shortcomings. INAMU hired a team composed of two designers, an architect, a social worker, a graphic designer and a photographer. These travelled throughout the year to each region and worked with the women artisans. They developed products directed to the tourism market, using, where possible, available local materials. Thirteen women in the Osa Peninsula graduated from a year-long cycle, developing new, branded product collections. Most of the women that I worked with for my field practicum had participated in this group, which permitted me to gain valuable insight based on their experiences. While the process in this region was meant to be participatory, many participants that I talked to did not feel that they were in control of their creative process, and felt subject to the hierarchy of the designers, who were perceived as more educated and possessing greater knowledge. Furthermore, even after graduation, any changes made to their products were subject to revision by the design team, and permission for changes was sometimes denied. These factors do not promote a feeling of ownership of the products the women developed. In all the cases, branding elements were digitalized and printed by the design team, while the artisans were not given possession of the digital files, and had no means to modify or reproduce them, creating static representations of themselves with which they were not always satisfied. In two cases the women were satisfied with their new products and branding, and were successfully selling them in local and national markets.
Weaving collaboration

I had a long history of collaboration with ASCONA, the local organization based in Puerto Jiménez. I used to visit Puerto Jiménez often when I lived in San José, as a close friend was living there. She worked with ASCONA, and this is how I came into contact with the NGO. After a few years, I wrote a project with Ifigenia Garita, the founder and director of ASCONA, for the government fund Puntos de Cultura, which we obtained and for which I was coordinator for six months, living in the Osa Peninsula from January to July of 2016. The project consisted in working with grassroots organizations peninsula-wide to organize cultural festivals, and workshops for organizational strengthening. Through this government fund, ASCONA articulated with other grassroots organizations working in the arts and culture, including GuanaRed, a national network of cultural activists. We started attending some of their meetings and members of GuanaRed collaborated in the production of two cultural festivals in Osa. During this time we also met RedESS, as many of their members also belong to GuanaRed. RedESS and GuanaRed brought in new perspectives to ASCONA, who started incorporating more components of popular education and solidarity economies into their work. Meanwhile, ASCONA allowed GuanaRed and RedESS to expand its reach to the isolated Osa Peninsula.

ASCONA administrates the public library in Puerto Jiménez, and in 2017 hired Dinnia Arias, a member of a women’s artisan group (then called PROPI), to be their administrator. This is how ASCONA (and I) came into contact with the group now known as Mujeres de Corcovado (Women of Corcovado). When I told Dinnia about the project she was excited and eager for her and her group to participate.

Mujeres de Corcovado

After I pitched my field practicum project to ASCONA in early 2017, they introduced me to their library’s administrator, Dinnia Arias, member of an organized artisan women’s group. Originally the group was named PROPI, short for Proyecto Producto con Identidad, the name of the institutional project in which they participated with the National Institute of Women (INAMU) for one year. With INAMU, they developed a new collection of branded products, with emphasis on place and cultural identity, and continued functioning as a group after the project ended. They renamed themselves Mujeres de Corcovado during our work together.
ASCONA

ASCONA (Asociación de Servicio Comunitario Nacional y Ambiental para la Conservación de la Naturaleza y la Biodiversidad, which translates into National Association of Community and Environmental Service for the Conservation of Nature and Biodiversity) is a Puerto Jiménez-based grassroots organization founded in 2009. The mission of ASCONA is to defend and protect the Osa Peninsula’s natural resources and protected areas, working with communities on environmental education, and supporting sustainable livelihoods, including local artistic and cultural expressions.

RedESS

Red de Economía Social y Solidaria de Costa Rica (RedESS) is a national network that represents the solidarity economy movement in Costa Rica. It is a decentralized initiative made up of grassroots organizations and collectives countrywide that share the values of the solidarity economy movement. The network, in its own words, “facilitates a process of articulation, dialogue, reflection, communication and action; weaving together a social tissue that enhances social, economic, political and cultural relations between persons and organized groups in order to promote and strengthen the practice of social and solidarity economies” (RedESS 2017). As articulated in its mission statement, RedESS aims, through political advocacy and educational outreach, to strengthen local economies, make visible and encourage solidarity practices (for which it promotes a set of values embedded in productive activities) and contribute to a constant, reflective process of identity construction linked to people’s territory and their culture. Working with campesinxs and other rural and urban grassroots organizations, many of them operating outside Costa Rica’s formal economy, its fundamental principles are horizontal participation, solidarity, equity, compromise, and collective construction.
GuanaRED

GuanaRED is a Costa Rican network that links over 25 organizations working in the artistic and cultural activisms. It was born in 2005 in Nicoya, Guanacaste (North Pacific coast), and became a national network only one year later, due to concerted efforts of articulation by its members. For over ten years the network has worked for the defense of people’s cultural rights, ancestral knowledges, buen vivir, solidarity economies, social and communal arts, agroecology, communal education and communication strategies, feminisms, diverse bodies, appropriation of public spaces and the use of open source technology. Buen vivir is a Latin American social movement rooted in Andean indigenous world views, related to the right of human beings to have a good quality of life that is measured beyond material wealth (incorporating spiritual wellbeing), beyond individualist conceptions (coming from a communal mindset), and beyond anthropocentrism (considering human beings as part of nature).
Collaboration and team work

Before arriving in Costa Rica, I received input from ASCONA and friends from GuanaRed. Carmen Díaz, from this network, offered to help in logistics and be my assistant producer, linking me with people in the Ministry of Culture of Costa Rica to present the project in Costa Rica before implementation, to gather their opinions and feedback. Because she lives in San José, she travelled periodically to help me with several workshops and attended to an event with us, helping us set up tools and materials, photograph and take videos. I also met with RedESS to present the project to them, and they agreed to support me. I wrote an article about the project, which they published on their website. They committed to facilitate a workshop on solidarity economies, and we reflected together on how the network could incorporate organizations in the Osa Peninsula and expand its work there. They also committed to invite two artisans to participate in the Second National Encounter of Solidarity Economies in Punta Morales, Puntarenas (Central Pacific coast), where they could share experiences with other rural entrepreneurs that are part of the network. RedESS suggested the mapping exercise on p. 32, and this turned out to be a very interesting and important exercise.

I also intended to train one of the artisans as my co-facilitator, so that this person could replicate the workshops after I left. This turned out to be more difficult than I thought, especially because of time constraints that this person ended up having (for more information see Logistics and Team Work on p. 41).
Process & Methodology

Iterative design: change is the only constant

Planning and designing this project was an ongoing upward spiral process of researching, designing, learning some more and then redesigning. I was not finished planning and designing the project before it started, but rather continued to do so during the implementation, based on the experiences and feedback I gathered (from participants and through my own observation). My design process for this curriculum or learning experience initiated a semester prior to the implementation of the project, on January 2017. The framework was developed in three classes taken at the University of Florida: a graphic design seminar emphasizing service design; a class on participatory design methods; and a research methods class.

I asked myself how I could bring in my professional expertise as a designer, but do so in a way that fosters collaborative design. A key thing to mention is that I planned for flexibility; my methodology was to gather a pool of methods, guided by strategies and objectives which I devised after researching many sources: both academic sources on relevant subjects and coming from design, anthropology, economics, education and social movements, informal conversations with participating stakeholders, grey literature and official/government documents. The most important thing was to get the stakeholders at the table to agree on the project objectives and the guiding strategies. This allowed me to devise a “pool of methods” and articulate it roughly into a three-month plan containing a participatory research phase, a workshop phase combined with individual work, and an evaluation phase; however, there was room to modify and change the content that would be learned. The specific topics would be defined in conjunction with the participants upon arrival to the site. There was also room for additional activities outside of the classroom, if opportunities arose on site. I intended this toolkit to be a platform for transformative experiences, based on the needs that we would identify together: generating these experiences would be a serendipitous collective process, aided by a series of methods and guiding principles. The challenge that this way of working poses is large: one runs the risk of getting lost in the realm of possibilities, losing direction (especially if there are contradictory voices participating) and running into resource/time limitations that limit your flexibility. However, I consider that flexibility and resilience are essential in any collaborative learning process.

My project started roughly one month later than intended, due to unexpected circumstances (I was originally going to work in another community, but this did not work out because participation was low). This meant that my initial plan had to change, and I had to work faster with the artisans to devise a plan for the workshops. I met with Dinnia Arias several times and showed her some of the
creative methods I had developed, to gather her feedback. Dinnia conversed with the artisan group through Whatsapp, asked them specific questions that we came up with together, and communicated their feedback to me. I relied on the trust that she had built with her group, and having her as a mediator helped them trust me from the beginning. I also had conversations with members of my host organization, ASCONA. After two weeks we held the first workshop, where we planned the workshop phase together, and discussed important events that required some form of support, such as attending local markets.

The resulting process consisted of nine four-hour workshops conducted weekly, combined with individual work and attendance to several local events and one national event organized by RedESS. Rather than having a separate evaluation phase, due to time constraints evaluation and feedback would be gathered throughout the process, and in the closing session we would hold a roundtable to collectively synthesize evaluations.

FIGURE 8

Preliminary toolkit developed over the Spring 2017 semester. Some of the tools considered were carving and bookbinding utensils, paint, parchment, kraft, bond and newspaper, and a basic laptop, among others. Local resources such as fibers and natural pigments were also considered.

FIGURE 9

Design methodology developed for illustration and pattern creation, tested with potato stamps.

Preliminary Toolkit
- Objectives & Strategies
- Pool of methods
- Postcards
- Workbook
- Activity diary
- Tools/materials
- Preliminary workshop plan
- Open mind

*“doing” - lead people
*“adapting” - guide
*“making” - provide scaffolds
*“creating” - offer a clean slate
*role of co-design in post-capitalist society
*Paulo Freire: “no one learns and no one teaches anything. No one learns anything. No one teaches. No one educates himself alone. People educate each other, mediated by the world and history.” *Ivan Illich

Co-creation
Any act of collective creativity
Complete list of research methods used

- Informal conversations
- Curriculum development (including diverse creative methods such as a workbook with design exercises)
- Ethnographic observation
- Semi-structured interviews
- Field notes/diary
- Focus group
- Participatory mapping
- Time-tracking (web of life)
- Monitoring & Evaluation

The women included me in their Whatsapp group, where we coordinated the activities and provided each other feedback on their products. In the screenshot, Dinnia is providing feedback to Rebeca on her book markers made of coconut fiber.

During the execution of the project, I exchanged emails with my committee members, writing about my experiences and expressing doubts and fears. They provided feedback and practical advice that was very important and influenced my decisions.
Workshops

June 16, 2017: Validation session
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

- Icebreaker
- Individual drawing exercise: “who am I?”
- Pairs: exploring ancient and contemporary symbols
- Group discussion
- Participatory determination of topics for the rest of sessions

**FIGURE 10**
Ice breaker: choreographing consecutive gestures or dance moves, resulting in laughter and relaxation.

**FIGURE 12**
Jessica Calvo and Joneci Cascante (who had to withdraw for personal reasons) discussing their analysis of the Triskele, a Celtic symbol. They particularly enjoyed learning about the significance of the Triskele.

**FIGURE 13**
Participatory determination of topics and order for the coming workshops. Participants agreed to every topic suggested by me; they added packaging.

**FIGURE 11**
Who am I? Visual representation by María Arias, depicting her favorite activities: the enjoyment of her natural surroundings (watching sunsets at the beach, farm animals and countryside), conviviality (playing and spending time with her family), creativity (drawing), and physical exercise. I noticed the absence of men in her representation of family.
June 23, 2017: Packaging  
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

- Two-minute individual presentations
- Principles of packaging design
- Packaging exercises using templates

FIGURE 14
María Arias’ business is named Masarpa de Osa, which she renamed to Jaguares de Osa. During the two-minute presentations, participants were interrupting each other, drifting off topic and going over time. I realized we should establish some ground rules for mutual respect.

FIGURE 15
Small models of packaging templates presented to participants. Two hours (which is what we had left after the presentations) was not nearly enough time to explore packaging in a satisfactory manner. Developing skills and precision to make your own packaging is not a matter of a few hours. No participant finished her packaging exercise satisfactorily, which is why we decided on holding an extra packaging workshop on July 10.

FIGURE 16
The children’s area, where they used potato and vegetable stamps with paint, drew and painted. The potato stamps were a hit; I carved stamps with Dinnia before each workshop.

June 30, 2017: Design principles observed in nature  
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

- Presentation: universal design principles observed in nature
- Elaboration of creative workbook
- Illustration exercises
I think that the women enjoyed learning about design principles found in nature so much because nature is a recurrent theme around them, since they grew up close to it. Many of their activities involve interaction with nature. I see potential in expanding this section in the future and engaging in experiential observation (for example, take field trips to gather specimens and analyze design characteristics).

FIGURE 17

Making the creative workbooks; participants sewed the pages together and glued them to cardboard covers that they were meant to personalize with their own designs.

FIGURE 18

Excerpts from the creative workbook methodology I developed; it involved taking a single element through a series of iterations to obtain patterns based on rotations, symmetry and abstraction.

FIGURE 19

July 7, 2017: Illustration and stamp making
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

Pattern making and stamping (finish creative workbook exercises). See next page.
Shirley Méndez applying symmetry to her drawing. Below, her hexagonal tracing template used to derive an abstract design from her initial drawing.

Participants made comments like “how fun!” and “we can make works of art with this technique!”. It was clear to me that this is the workshop that they enjoyed the most, especially because they experienced the ability to make multiple prints and patterns of an element that came out of their head.
July 10, 2017: Extra packaging session
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

- Continue and finish packaging exercises.

For Rebeca’s handbags, we decided that a box was not appropriate packaging. We suggested she fold them, using cardboard as a support, and wrap a strip of paper with her logo and information around them. How to work with and execute typography is also an unresolved challenge.

July 14, 2017: Collective feedback session
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

- Go-around in pairs: design critique stations exercise
- Discussion
- Handout: web of life time-tracking tool, and feedback cards

Guide for constructive criticism, used by participants as they went around in pairs critiquing their peers’ work in the following areas: product design, finishes, functionality, sustainability, graphic design, and packaging.

FIGURE 24
For Rebeca’s handbags, we decided that a box was not appropriate packaging. We suggested she fold them, using cardboard as a support, and wrap a strip of paper with her logo and information around them. How to work with and execute typography is also an unresolved challenge.

FIGURE 25
Printed paper bag by Yeiny Mesén. Stamp design based on her brand Carey, inspired by the Carey turtle (Eretmochelys imbricata).

FIGURE 26
Lineamientos para hacer una crítica constructiva:
- **Diseño:** ¿La forma es agradable a la vista? ¿El producto parece lo que se esperaba o es original? ¿Tiene relación con el lugar de donde proviene? ¿Describible o hace alusión a características propias de su lugar de procedencia?
- **Acabados:** ¿Se ve maestría en la técnica? ¿Detalles como pulido, textura, detalles en pintura, nitidez de las formas, barnizado/sellador, nitidez de las costuras, uso del color?
- **Funcionalidad y sostenibilidad:** ¿El objeto cumple con la tarea para la cual fue diseñado? ¿Tiene alguna inconveniencia en su manipulación? ¿El uso de los materiales es correcto? ¿Contiene materiales biodegradables / reutilizables / reciclables? ¿Tiene un periodo de caducidad?
- **Gráfica:** ¿La gráfica comunica el propósito, los valores y el sueño del emprendimiento? ¿Es fácil de leer? ¿Se reconoce claramente en ella el producto o la artesana que lo hizo? ¿Comunica toda la información necesaria?
- **Empaque:** ¿El empaque es agradable a la vista? ¿Los materiales utilizados son reutilizables? ¿Agrega valor al producto? ¿Protege al producto de los elementos?

Agrega valor al producto!
Dinnia Arias writing down the Purpose, Values and Dreams of her initiative. Peers would evaluate to what degree her graphic design communicates these elements, and make suggestions.

Participants affirmed that they had never participated in an exercise like this, but were more accustomed to unilateral advice coming from professionals.

The Web of Life is a visual time-tracking tool that I developed in replacement of an activity diary. Its use creates coloured patterns that illustrate the hours that a person spends undertaking different categorized activities. It is meant to make participants conscious of their time allocation, and spark conversations about where and how they can improve their distribution of time. Participants stated that they preferred this visual way of registering information as opposed to a more traditional writing approach.

I handed out feedback cards in Spanish and English to participants, for customers and public to fill out during markets and events, or for them to leave in souvenir shops.
July 21, 2017: Women’s circle
12:00 - 16:00, held in Germinar (local social business), Puerto Jiménez

Designed and facilitated by member of GuanaRed Natalia Vargas. She graduated as a social worker from the University of Costa Rica in 2009. As a feminist researcher and cultural activist, she holds varied experience in participatory communal processes and methodologies. Since 2010 she has been focusing on gender and sexual and reproductive rights in rural and indigenous communities. In 2011 was her first experience learning the women’s circle methodology, and since then she approaches gender from a decolonial and spiritual perspective, with great influence from the communal feminisms and ecofeminist movements.

- Feedback session on product development (this was facilitated by me).
- Introduction to women’s circles
- Reflections
- Appreciation cards
- Checking my emotions
- Dancing and singing ancient songs
- Circle of love

During the product feedback session, artisans offered to provide each other with knowledge and materials. Seamstresses offered others sewing lessons and fabric scraps for others to experiment with new products.

Handbags by Yeiny Mesén.

Intergenerational participation: Yeiny’s daughter and a teenage niece participated in the circle. Encouraging younger generations to participate in these spaces during their formative period might very well be important in shaping their future.

When asked what being a woman means to them, virtually all equated it with struggling. Struggling for recognition, to resist aggression, and to make a living, take care of their children, and themselves. Many ran away from home at a young age. Most of them recognized that self-care is one of the last things on their list, and that society has taught them to think of everything but themselves. Other women alluded to a unique connection with nature, and a relationship with the mystical things in life. Many women also shared that they found it hard to write positive things about themselves in the appreciation cards.
Participants loved the collective altar in which they placed objects of emotional value. They also loved the Goddess cards, a set of cards that collects archetypes of female deities from many societies that reside in our collective unconsciousness. Each person took out a card and read it out loud or to herself. They started identifying each other with different archetypes. It was an interesting exercise of mutual reassertion and empowerment.

**FIGURE 34**

Inspirational poem for participants to read and hold on to.

When discussing sexuality and self-assertion, many participants affirmed that, despite traumatic past experiences, they had managed to find affectionate partners, and that they were engaged in pleasurable intimacy. Some reflected that they felt sorry that their mothers and grandmothers did not have the opportunity to experience healthy relationships, which implies that there has been generational change.

**FIGURE 35**

Circle of love: “I am you, you are me. By healing myself, you are healing too, and vice versa. And this helps the world heal.” (Repeated by participants)

**FIGURE 36**

Participants loved the collective altar in which they placed objects of emotional value. They also loved the Goddess cards, a set of cards that collects archetypes of female deities from many societies that reside in our collective unconsciousness. Each person took out a card and read it out loud or to herself. They started identifying each other with different archetypes. It was an interesting exercise of mutual reassertion and empowerment.
July 28, 2017: Solidarity Economies (SE)  
12:00 - 16:00, held in the Public Library of Puerto Jiménez

This workshop was designed and facilitated by coordinating member of RedESS Glendy Barrantes. Glendy is a geographer and informal educator, part of RedESS coordinating team. She has supported processes of articulation and linkage between grassroots organizations across the Costa Rican territory, by contributing to the creation of solidary economic circuits, managing solidary commerce spaces, exchange tables (mesas de trueque) and encouraging organizational strengthening by imparting management workshops for grassroots organizations from a Solidarity Economy perspective.

- Introduction to Solidarity Economies (SE) and RedESS
- Practices and disciplines associated with SE
- Concept dice
- Mesa de Trueque (Exchange table)

FIGURE 37
Concept dice: participants had to find creative ways to link the concepts in the dice with the concepts on the ground, encouraging systemic thinking and contextual analysis.

FIGURE 38
Discussing practices and disciplines associated with SE. Agroecology, ancestral artisanal techniques (such as natural pigments and weaving with forest fibers) and democratic, communal decision-making processes.

FIGURE 39
Mesa de Trueque: participants were asked to bring objects to trade amongst ourselves. We invented a local currency and assigned values to the products, based on collectively decided, non-market values. For example, a product that was made by the person bringing it had more value than something imported. Products that recycled/reused materials also had a greater value. More than the equivalent to $100 were traded.

FIGURE 40
Participants affirmed that they enjoy negotiating with each other around the exchange table, and that artisans in rural areas have the habit of exchanging products during markets and other events where they participate as sellers.
August 4, 2017: Closing day
11:00 - 16:00, held in the home of Dinnia Arias (El Ñeque)

- Presentations prototypes
- Participatory mapping of raw material sources and commercialization locations
- Presentations Web of Life
- Evaluation of process: roundtable
- Celebration with a shared meal

Prototypes and stamps were displayed on the table and each participant took turns presenting their work, receiving compliments and feedback from the rest. In the front, cutlery holder (left) and folded handbags by Rebeca Arias.

Participatory mapping exercise; the women traced the locations where their materials came from, and the places where they sold their products.
Maps containing the information of all the participants. The following can be observed:
1) there is a dependency on the Central Valley (area where the main cities are located) for the procurement of materials. This makes me think of the need to innovate developing local materials and technologies.
2) Commercialization is predominantly local (within the Peninsula and surroundings), targeting tourism (local souvenir shops) and local businesses and inhabitants.

FIGURE 43

The women presented their Webs of Life and reflected collectively on what they had learned from the time-tracking exercise. A couple of women stated that they had realized how much conflict they had in their lives and wanted to do something about it. Others were shocked by the amount of orange (representing domestic work), and how little time they are proportionally investing in their artisanal endeavors. Others realized that they had to rest very often because they felt sick; they also made connections of their health to emotional issues that were affecting their wellbeing; these were almost all issues related to gender. In general terms, participants were happy with the tool and said that they intended to keep using it; I gave them several templates for them to photocopy for future use.

FIGURE 44

Round table/focus group. Markets: “Our PROPI products have good design. However there are no design shops here in Osa. Our products would sell if they were sold in San José, but not here. There’s no market for luxury objects here.” Project positives: “This has been the shortest and most beneficial project that I’ve had.” “Getting to keep the materials and tools that we use is excellent.” “Our relationship with you (me) has been excellent. The fact that you take our opinions into consideration, this is very important; for example this (focus group). We’ve almost never experienced this opportunity in prior projects.” “In the past we have felt used, organizations have used us to reflect a statistic, to justify a budget, and then they leave. We feel very different with you.” Shortcomings: “I wish I could have participated more fully, but I had so many orders (from clients) that kept me busy.” “We would have liked to learn display and stand design for when we participate in our events.” Visualizing the future: “We would like to have a shop where we all sell our products.” Quotes translated from Spanish by Florencia Lathrop.
Samples of product prototypes, incorporating feedback given throughout the process, and applying stamp techniques to product and packaging.

Nydia Garcia and her daughter, wearing a shirt sewn by her and stamped with one of the workbook exercises. “The most beneficial topic for me was stamp making. I have been wanting to print my own designs for a long time, but it’s a very expensive service. With this methodology we learned (referencing the creative workbook), I can design new product collections and then print them myself.” (Translated by Florencia Lathrop)
Events & other activities

July 22, 2017: Folklore festival in Golfito
8:00 - 14:00, held in the central park of Golfito (see map on p.10)

Accompanying María Arias to sell products from Mujeres de Corcovado, which involved:

- Participant observation
- Informal conversations
- Documentation of activities, observing behavior, analyzing the public

FIGURE 49 & 50

Festival Folclórico Senderos del Golfo, organized by the Municipality of Golfito. María and I noticed that the Municipality had not made partnerships with local grassroots organizations in organizing, which is probably why there was so little attendance.

FIGURE 51 & 52

Left: I noticed that the women could benefit from learning about display curation, and how to design furniture for display. Right: Folklore dance performed by students of Puerto Jiménez. Dresses designed and made by Jessica Calvo. In the picture, Jessica’s daughter performing.

FIGURE 53 & 54

No feedback cards were used by customers. I realized that the women were shy to interact with their public and did not feel comfortable asking them to fill out the cards. María told me that the sales were very bad, and that very few people attended.
July 22, 2017: National Encounter of Solidarity Economies (RedESS)
All day, held in the installations of the University of Costa Rica in Punta Morales, Puntarenas.

While Maria attended the Folklore festival, Dinnia and Rebeca attended the Second Encounter of Solidarity Economies organized by RedESS. In this event they shared experiences with other artisans and agricultural producers belonging to the network, reflected on solidarity economies, participated in working tables and learned about communal finance initiatives. After the event I interviewed them, to gather their experiences and impressions.

According to Dinnia, sharing experiences with women from other rural areas of the country during the solidarity economy encounter helped them build self-esteem and value their condition as rural women. “It made us feel less lonely, meeting so many people, especially women, that were facing the same struggles as us. This makes us think that we’re on the right path, and our dream of working collectively for a better future is possible” (interview on July 26, 2017). Both Dinnia and Rebeca mentioned how they felt strengthened when they realized that many women had the same challenges and issues as them; at the same time, they were able to see the advantage that they had as rural women decoupled from formal markets, because they could creatively reinvent their own economic rules, had access to land and a healthy lifestyle connected to nature.

Furthermore, they pointed out how the network works in a horizontal manner: “We never found out who the boss was. Everyone (the organizers) made decisions by consulting with each other. There was never a tense atmosphere”. Both wanted to become more involved in the network, and were interested in establishing a territorial committee in the Osa Peninsula.
August 1 – 3, 2017: Semi structured interviews during home visits
Agujas, Palo Seco, Bambú, Playa Blanca.

I visited the homes of María Arias, Nidia García, Shirley Méndez and Estefanny Guerrero, to document their workshops and ask them the following questions in a semi-structured format:

1) Describe your artisanal work
2) Describe your process (from design, obtaining raw materials, to sale and distribution)
3) What is the most complicated part of your process and why?
4) Describe your market(s)
5) What are your future plans, how would you like to see yourself in the future?

*All quotes below are translated from Spanish by Florencia Lathrop

**FIGURE 58**

*María Arias, resin figures:*
“When I was a child, we lived with very little. There were coconut palm trees in our farm, so we would feed the chicken and the pigs coconut. I would make earrings with coconut wood during high school, and people started to ask me to make more.”

**FIGURE 59**

*Nidia García, clothing designer:*
“I’m very passionate about what I do, it’s easy for me to make a living out of it. Word of mouth is the best marketing strategy in the Osa Peninsula. My models are my three sisters. When I want to try a new design, I sew it for them and send them off to parties and events in town. People ask for my contact after learning that I made their clothes. In three years, I expect to build my own shop and workshop in Cañaza, where we acquired land. I’d say my current limitations are raw materials, which have to be bought in the Central Valley or abroad, and tools; I would be far more productive if I had industrial sewing machines”

**FIGURE 60**

*Shirley Méndez, woodworker:*
“They have always said: “that’s a man’s job (woodworking)”, I have learned everything on my own, because I told myself I would never depend economically on a man. My dream is to teach other women woodworking skills.”

**FIGURE 61**

*Estefanny García, woodworker:*
“I like to work with scrap wood from sawmills, that would otherwise be burnt, for example leftover branches from teak plantations. I would like to learn more about painting, to improve my animal paintings on wood.”
August 4: Souvenir shop visit  
Puerto Jiménez Airport

This is the only souvenir shop in Puerto Jiménez where the artisans were selling the products: five of them sell their crafts here. I had informal conversations with the owner of the souvenir shop, who provided information about tourism market preferences. I observed other products being sold and the layout and display of objects in the store.

FIGURE 62

The shop had a generally clustered display. I was visually saturated by an overflow of products, most of them were made out of wood and referred to local biodiversity. They were mainly made of tropical hardwoods, but also from teak (from nearby plantations).

FIGURE 63

I noticed the predominance of varnished or lacquered wood with a shiny finish. Most of the objects displayed are very similar to souvenirs found in other coastal touristic towns. The shop owner said that these are best sellers, and she often asks artisans to make them like this.

FIGURE 64

María Arias’ key chains and jaguar christmas tree decorations are best-sellers according to the owner. María had someone design and produce this wooden tree for display. Even though I feel it visually obstructs the products it’s displaying, it seems to be working for her...

FIGURE 65

Jaguars by María Arias in several poses; notice the green enlarged eyes. Is this done to appeal to white/foreign beauty standards?
Participants valued the opportunity to learn methods that required inexpensive tools that they could hold on to. In past experiences, institutions and organizations had provided tools only for the duration of the workshops, taking them away after these finished. The women shared with me the diverse ways in which they planned to apply what they had learned in their personal projects. Several participants pointed out that they had learned a lot in very little time: they felt that use of time during the workshops was very efficient, whereas with institutional (governmental) projects, things tended to go slower, and more time was spent ineffectively (focus group, August 4). Feeling that their ideas and opinions were taken into account was also new for them. For example, they had never been invited to a focus group, or a space where they could voice their opinions about a project that they had participated in.

The women enjoy making products that they know sell well in the region, even if they are not considered “good design” by outsiders and design professionals. The hen presented in page 8 is a clear example of the products that customers from the Osa Peninsula request to the women. While the PROPI (INAMU) consultants urged them to move away from this aesthetic towards more streamlined objects that you would find in design boutiques, it is important to ask for whom they are designing, as there seems to be a disconnect between the women’s PROPI collections and their markets (see p. 32, Figure 45). In cases like these, shouldn’t we, as designers, rethink our aesthetic values, considering them in relation to context and local markets? The artisans seem to have understood this better than us. Where, then, should innovation be directed? What would happen if we directed all the energy we are investing in aesthetic improvements based on our notions of the market towards strategies for understanding the context and supporting the goals of the people that we are working with?

Many topics required more in-depth immersion to be satisfactorily covered. Packaging was especially an area that needed more depth, because the prototypes developed were not satisfactory in appearance and functionality (see p. 24 and 27). The complexity of designing satisfactory packaging was evident because of the lack of locally available materials, which increased the costs of transportation, along with an increased environmental footprint. I am not specialized in this area and therefore lacked the perspective to envision how local biodegradable materials might be transformed into attractive packaging. Participants also didn’t have enough time to develop the manual skills needed to craft packaging with satisfactory finishes. A parallel process of research and development of local packaging strategies proved too complex to accomplish, given time constraints and available resources.
Creative workbook

The creative workbook and the techniques it entailed was one of the most appreciated components by participants, as evident from their comments during the workshop, and in the final evaluation roundtable. Participants enjoyed the diversity that resulted from their initial drawings. Possessing the tools that they needed to elaborate all the exercises made them feel in control of the process and allowed them to envision future ways of continuing their graphic work independently.

The main problem was the lack of materials available for them after the workshops ended. There were no more carving block sheets left for them to continue their experimentation; carving block constitutes the most expensive material of the toolkit ($20 per sheet of 6 3/4 x 11”, of which approximately eight stamps can be made). This made it harder for them to keep experimenting and arriving at solutions to improve their sales, and thus devote a part of their enhanced profits to buying more materials and maintaining their tools. Other than this, carving letters also proved to be a limitation to this technique; small text is very difficult to accomplish, or long words. With practice, participants might stylize handprinted letters for their logos; however, for labels, business cards and other materials that need to include information (such as email addresses or telephone numbers), hand-carved stamps cannot do the job. I bought a computer with project funds for them to keep, but there was not enough time to impart a session on basic diagramming. This finding poses future challenges: how to digitally design and print materials that include more text, how to refine the stamp carving technique (especially typography) for the logos, added to the challenge of diagramming by hand (deciding the spatial distribution and visual hierarchy of the elements for improved legibility and understanding) and/or combining handmade print with digital print.

Studying design principles observed in nature

Participants enjoyed studying universal design principles observed in nature and how these could be applied to graphic design. Symmetry, rotations, fractals and abstract patterns present in local flora and fauna were presented to them (see p. 25) and commented on. Their initial representations of themselves evidenced that their pleasures were intimately tied with the natural environment, while their personal brands were mostly inspired by local biodiversity and environments. There is great potential in expanding this section with more experiential observation and learning, taking advantage of the natural surroundings outside of the classroom, which could spark many more creative solutions to their constraints, not only in pattern and graphic design, but in product design and packaging, for example.

Collective feedback session

The collective feedback session, in which participants went around in pairs and devoted time to critique their peers’ work was also a very important component, from which new product collections and significant modifications to existing products resulted. Participants stated that they had never been asked to critique each other’s products, and they enjoyed the process despite my initial hesitation. I was afraid that the women would react negatively to each other’s feedback, and take things personally; however this was not the case at all. I learned the significance of how, by reflecting around important questions, participants can provide valuable insights to each other.
Web of life - Weave of life

The web of life visual time-tracking tool sparked important conversations on conflict, commercialization and gender. Participants indicated they enjoyed creating the visual representations of what they do with their time, while it made them realize how much time they invest in domestic work, and they reflected on how caring for others limits the time that they are able to invest in their businesses. The artisans stated that this tool made them realize in what areas they needed to invest more time (e.g. commercialization, production), while all of them agreed that they intended to keep using the Web of Life after the project ends. We superficially discussed power structures that influenced their lives, however there is potential for a more in-depth immersion in this topic.

In terms of design, the web of life (p. 33) visually distorted the proportionality of the time devoted to their activities. Using concentric circles makes the area painted in the outer circles bigger, causing the activities recorded in these outer circles to appear like more hours. This was corrected after the project ended, by designing a rectangular square template in which each hour encompassed the exact same area, giving way to the Weave of Life. I mapped days out horizontally on equally-sized squares, and the colors were modified to create more contrast, thus improving legibility.

Women’s circle

Nurturing women’s support networks is key because they provide therapeutic outlets, while allowing them to find common ground, which empowers them as a group and allows them to become agents of change and to exert influence on the people surrounding them. Encouraging the younger generations to participate in these spaces during their formative period might very well be important in shaping their future. Sorority, self-love, self-care, and self-esteem were central concepts on which participants expanded. However, I thought about the lack of participation of men in our gender-related activities. Mujeres de Corcovado is an all-women’s group, so naturally no men participated in the workshops. However, we could have held a space where their husbands, sons, or other male relatives were invited to discuss gender. Why didn’t this happen? I think that this reflects the attitude of development projects during the past decades: overtly focusing on women, while neglecting the other half of the population that’s intricately tied into all the gender issues dealt with. It was our reflex to think only about women when talking about gender, as if changing gender structures was only the responsibility of women. This needs to change.
Mesa de trueque (exchange table)

The exchange table was held in workshop 8, where participants valued and exchanged goods and services by establishing independent criteria and using alternative currencies. This provided insight as to how solidarity economies could be operationalized, and how markets did not have to be ruled by the macro economy in order to exist. It also demonstrated how humans could derive joyful social interaction from commercial transactions, exchanging not only goods and services, but also affection, and strengthening their bonds. This was one of the favorite activities for participants, and as of this writing, they continue to hold exchange tables amongst each other, and with other artisans and producers.

Feedback cards

The feedback cards designed to hand out to customers during markets and in shops proved not to be successful. This was mainly because the artisans were reluctant to use them. When asked, they replied that they didn’t understand them very well and that they felt shy to ask for feedback from strangers. This finding implies that there is a need for greater emphasis on developing market research tools that the artisans and their public feel comfortable engaging with.

Logistics and team work

Having an assistant producer proved invaluable throughout the process. Her setting up the workspace, laying out the tools, cleaning, and taking care of the children’s area allowed me as facilitator to focus on the participants, answer their questions and document the process. On the days that she was not available, I had less time to document because I had to take care of logistics, and my attention to the participants was limited because I also had to attend the children. Therefore, I hired a person to take care of the children’s area during the workshop hours.

We set up a children’s area, where they painted, used vegetable stamps, read and occasionally watched a movie. The children enjoyed the activities and entertained themselves; however they were not as integrated into the creative methodologies as I had originally intended, mostly because I would have needed a person facilitating in parallel for the children. More thought needs to be devoted into how to better integrate children and youth into the curriculum, to encourage cross-generational learning. It would possibly be necessary to count on a parallel children’s facilitator during the workshops.

I intended for one of the artisans (Dinnia) to be my co-facilitator; this implied meeting with her during the week to discuss the activities for the coming workshop, and explaining the methods and tools used beforehand, so that she could teach the others. However, coordinating a time for us to meet was more difficult than I thought, because our schedules differed so much. In general, I realized how important it is to count on multiple perspectives on the facilitators’ end, and that it is necessary for me to co-facilitate with at least one other person. I also think that, for the future, training a co-facilitator from the community or the group that I am working with is key, because they would be able to replicate the process or impart knowledge after I leave. Even though the women learned the methodologies and tools imparted, a co-facilitator would additionally acquire experience in dealing with group dynamics and being in a position of leadership, and build her/his confidence. This person would also be able to imprint a local perspective on our workshop methodologies, and understand elements of local culture that I might be unable to grasp.
Reflections

Methodology

Due to the recentness of the project, it is impossible to evaluate whether the innovations made resulted in commercial success. One of the most important limitations of my field practicum is the lack of financial resources after the project finished, which are necessary to build a stock of materials that would allow the artisans to keep experimenting on their own. Most women that ran out of materials to continue carving stamps, packaging, labels, business cards etc. do not have the resources to invest in these to continue working. Therefore, a failure of the project was not considering a stock of materials for the artisans to continue experimenting before they arrive at solutions that permit them to increase their sales, and invest a portion of the profits into buying more materials.

The idea of gathering a pool of possible methods that can be organized and assembled to fit the needs and desires of a specific group proved to be very successful, as this assured the engagement and active participation of members throughout the process. While extensive thought was given to planning the methodology as a system, the specific workshop plans, and final details were developed on a weekly basis, allowing for more flexibility to be incorporated into the process without having to erase prior work. As a side note, this approach is more likely to require full-time involvement, as preparing the weekly workshops required from ten to twenty hours.

Ten weeks was not enough time to cover the proposed topics in sufficient depth. Topics which need more time allocation are: packaging, design principles found in nature, stamping and other artisanal printing techniques. Other topics which were identified as important but weren’t included in the curriculum were: display design, manual and digital diagramming, typography, natural dyes and pigments, communal finance models, accounting, costing and inventory management and intellectual property rights, more strategies for research and development, and political incidence. While the argument can be made that it would have been wiser to focus on one area (e.g. only graphic design) to be more thorough and further refine design proposals, I do not think that other key areas of the project could have been sacrificed. Design yields more outcomes than just design, and it does not happen in a vacuum. I see design as a long-term, collaborative and iterative process that is intertwined with multiple dimensions and issues that mediate and affect the women’s products and their visual self-representations. In this sense, a design process is never fully resolved, nor will design ever stop being necessary. Learning tools to continue this ongoing exploration and thought process is more useful than overtly focusing on developing refined technical solutions.
Strengthening collaborative networks

Organizational strengthening, building self-esteem and working on gender and economic issues go hand in hand with graphic and product design, because they influence their capacity as artisans, and I consider that working on this might be more important and lasting than developing refined prototypes. From my perspective, it is more important to build capacity slowly and integrally, on multiple areas, than to focus on one area and leave the others unattended.

One of the major successes consisted in the new relationships forged and alliances built. Mujeres de Corcovado forged a new relationship with the Ngäbe community, through the inclusion of Verónica Bejarano into the group. The relationship between host organization ASCONA and Mujeres de Corcovado was also strengthened, evidenced by the offer of ASCONA to keep financing monthly workshops on topics of interest to the artisans. The establishment of a permanent working space for the artisans in the public library was also a sign of a strengthened collaborative environment. Furthermore, ASCONA is establishing a solidary marketplace every 15 days in Puerto Jiménez called Mercasol. This also has to do with the participation of RedESS in my project, which forged a new relationship between ASCONA and RedESS, and further familiarized ASCONA with the principles of solidarity economy, which align with their working philosophy. They have been communicating to envision ways in which RedESS can support Mercasol. RedESS forged a new relationship with Mujeres de Corcovado. This is important because, up to this moment, RedESS had no contact with collectives further South than Pérez Zeledón. The artisans expressed interest to incorporate into the network and form a territorial committee. Mujeres de Corcovado were recently invited to a solidarity economy conference in the University of Costa Rica in September. The women gathered resources for two members to attend and represent the rest, while a friend of the network provided housing, evidencing autonomous processes.

This project allowed Mujeres de Corcovado to come into contact with GuanaRed. As a result of this contact, they were offered to be one of the recipient groups that will benefit from a cultural project in 2018 managed by GuanaRed, in which they will receive workshops on methodologies to increase their political participation in the local government, emphasizing how to organize participatory consultation processes to formulate and present a municipal policy on culture. ASCONA was also selected to participate in these workshops, with the aim of equipping them with tools to organize and coordinate these participatory consultation processes to formulate local policy from the bottom up.

Markets

Diversifying products to target a mix of tourism and local markets seems a good strategy to provide a stable income throughout the year and benefit from tourism. Local and national culture needs to shift to value local hand-made goods over imported ones, but this must go in hand with national policy that incentivizes local production and makes it more affordable for producers and consumers.
**Replicability**

The tools and methods learned created an enjoyable collaborative process in which bonds between participants were strengthened. The tools used were low-cost and compatible with the talents of the artisans; however some materials ran out once the project finished (for example fabric paints and carving block) which hindered their capacity to continue design experimentations. Packaging is an area where participants are still hindered by the lack of availability of materials and the complexity of making custom orders from the central valley. Packaging strategies based on locally-developed materials are still non-existent.

Dinnia Arias presented a project proposal to the Ministry of Culture in which she will hold creative workshops on crafts with members of a nearby community. Here, she intends to replicate some of the methods learned during the project, such as the creative workbook exercises. This constitutes an important step towards my secondary problem statement, which concerned the sustainability of the process. She is depending, however, on government funds which might not always be available.

**Masculinities**

Gender is rarely addressed from a male perspective in development projects, and we subconsciously reproduce this, by not opening up spaces for the men that were part of the artisans’ networks to participate. It is important to analyze the effects of machismo and the social construction of subordinated masculinities on men. Men also have the responsibility of analyzing the ways in which patriarchy oppresses them, and assessing their behavior in order to construct alternative masculinities that are less toxic for themselves and the people around them, while reflecting on structural or invisible forces that call for systemic change. Any initiative to positively impact existing gender structures is destined to fail if men are not included in the conversation (Valdes & Olavarría 1997, Guzman & Lucero 2003, Pizarro 2016, Paulson 2016). In any community-based initiative, men should not be excluded from gender conversations, and as practitioners and researchers we need to equip ourselves with tools to work with boys and men on issues that are relevant to them, and that are interconnected with women’s issues. The Weave of Life can create future opportunities to initiate gender discussions around the topic of house work, where men can be invited to reflect on these. In the future, I think that it is important to build alliances with men’s organizations working on the topic of masculinities (for example, men in GuanaRed hold periodical men’s circles).
Conclusions

I arrived at these conclusions based on information gathered through multiple channels: informal conversations with the participating artisans, with participating organizations and friends (both of the Osa Peninsula and outside) that were somehow involved in the process. I gathered knowledge from observation during workshops and events, talking to other sellers at events, and visiting several souvenir shops in Puerto Jiménez. I also held a closing evaluation with the artisans in the form of a focus group, carried out on the last workshop day (see p. 35, Figure 45). My field notes, written after every workshop and event, contained important reflections that helped me analyze what happened. And last, feedback from my committee helped me synthesize my experience.

Project conclusions

Previous design interventions have shaped the working culture of the women, primarily because they have created a dynamic in which outside consultants come in as “experts” to prescribe solutions and direct the artisans in their designs. This project instituted a different working culture resulting from deep participation, in which constant dialogue between participants and facilitators allowed us to arrive at solutions together: the artisans had the final say, and not the other way around. Equitable exchange of ideas can only result from the belief that no one is superior - a mindset often difficult to reach because of existing power dynamics based on perceived differences in education, wealth and social status. I cannot be sure that I overcame this entirely, but I do know that participants appreciated our working relationship.

While the methods used during this process were generally successful, I recognize that they are grounded on a Western mindset. Indigenous cultures have different and diverse traditions of learning and integrating information, for which different learning methods might need to be constructed altogether. At the same time, artisans working under Western traditions might benefit from learning other methods of gathering and expressing information, and vice-versa. Developing intercultural creative methods could spark innovative ways of seeing graphic design and explore the new roles that the discipline could take on.

A flexible toolkit should not consist of a constrained set of methods, tools, materials and practices; it should rather consist of a set of strategies through which facilitators and artisans can collaboratively learn about context: this will then determine the need for diverse approaches, tools and methods that are contextually appropriate and feed into the personal and professional aspirations of participants.
It is important to think about the artisans as part of a wider community – this means identifying what other professions and trades exist in their communities and how they might synergize/ work together to change their situations collectively. Seeing the artisans as isolated actors limits our understanding of context and how they are influenced by, and influence, other systems. This ties in with my reflection about the need to incorporate men into our framework of analysis. Promoting wider community involvement can strengthen local affective, creative, and economic synergies, and it can also create opportunities for men to reflect on gender issues.

Personally I find it important to produce a deliverable for the artisans, because it shows reciprocity and respect for their work. Materializing the documentation of their work and effort into something tangible that they can keep is important because they can find the reflections and recommendations in it useful, while they can also use it to showcase their work to others. I am working on a compendium of the visual work that they made, along with an evaluation, conclusions and recommendations. This work will take the form of an illustrated case study, that can be motivational and useful for participants to reflect on their work, while it’s a good way for us to show our work to other organizations that might be interested in pursuing similar processes.

Perhaps, more important than the economic or product outcomes were the affectionate ties and collaborative work environment created and/or strengthened. They also had a chance to reflect collectively on their values and how to transmit them through their work as artisans, and as a group. The workshops were spaces where participants shared stories and laughed together, which at the same time led to an exchange of knowledge which improved their products. For example, a participant that knew how to sew gave sewing lessons to a participant that wanted to create a new collection of handbags. Participants that were experienced making handbags gave scrap fabric pieces to others.

**What others can learn from this**

Flexibility and resilience are intimately tied: in order to adapt to changing conditions, expecting the unexpected is key. Being flexible enough to constantly engage in a process of learning and adjusting the plan to the new information derived is tough, as it requires detachment: planning and implementing a project leads to emotional involvement if one does this with passion. This might cause us to “marry” activities that are not necessarily the most suitable ones. Planning initially implies making some assumptions which might need to be readjusted when re-encountered with reality, and keeping this in mind from the beginning can save us a lot of trouble.

There is great potential to expand on this project: it constitutes an initial phase in which alternative ways of working were explored. Both the designs created and the methodologies and tools used can be advanced in subsequent phases (see Further directions). It is important to never think of a project as complete or finished, but rather as a link in a network of ongoing processes that will continue when the implementation time ends. Therefore, what was accomplished can always be built upon.

Learning to listen is key: the women constantly repeated how refreshing and empowering it was for them to feel listened to, having their thoughts and input being taken into consideration. I was quite frankly surprised that none of the prior institutional projects that they had been involved in had asked them for their evaluation of the process. Furthermore, listening is a prerequisite for equitable exchange of knowledge and ideas. One cannot understand if one cannot listen to the person(s) that one is working with, and one cannot foster effective design solutions if one does not understand the person(s) with whom one is designing. Listening can be done through informal conversations, interviews, focus groups, and other creative methods that require input and self-expression on behalf of the participants.
Knowing the context is crucial before going to work: I do not think I could have accomplished this project, had I not been immersed in the context for years (as a Costa Rican traveling often to the Osa Peninsula) and had I not lived and worked there before. This does not mean that there was nothing new for me to learn about context; I encountered many surprises and learned many lessons. However, the experimental nature of design work makes it far more effective if one carries it out in a familiar place where one has built trust with the community. Therefore, as designers, either working in places where one has built trust, or choosing to team up with organizations that have built trust in a place that is new for us, is a vital strategy. Developing cultural competencies is often overlooked in social impact work, be it within the development field or design, when people belonging to different contexts set out to collaborate. Cultural competencies has a lot to do with learning to listen, and learning about context before you embark on a project, but it is not limited to this. It is equally important to develop self-reflexivity, and awareness about your lack of knowledge of a place compared to the people whose lived experiences have been shaped by it. Humility to recognize this leads to more openness to also engage in continuous learning throughout the process, instead of adhering to a set of preconceived notions about place and local dynamics. We need to openly recognize where we are coming from, and develop an understanding of where other people are coming from. Building trust is often overlooked in development projects. While I recognize that this is changing in recent years (with a lot of studies on the importance of social capital in the effectiveness of interventions), I think that structural issues still limit our ability to build trust with people that we are working with. For example, the way in which the grant system works, where you are given a limited time frame to accomplish a set of linear (often quantitative) outcomes, often results in the “sacrifice” of trust-building, as this is not considered “productive” time, and is rarely admitted into the budget of projects.
Further directions

As mentioned before, there is great potential in expanding this project in subsequent phases, while transitioning into a process of collective ownership. This means bringing in more people with diverse perspectives that can support the following recommendations:

1) Lengthen the implementation to allow a more in-depth coverage of the topics and inclusion of topics mentioned in evaluation: I would consider expanding from three to six months. Invest more time to the prior collaborative research phase; expanded learning about context will very likely increase the utility and effectiveness of the tools, materials and methodologies chosen/developed. Social network mapping on a prior phase is very likely to increase systems awareness and harness the development of creative solutions that involve wider communal involvement. This is also a good platform to comment and visualize existing power dynamics. While this project aims to promote self-reliance and independence (so that my “intervention” is no longer necessary), the nature of collaboration can change over time, and, as collaborative and social beings that benefit from networks, developing a long-term partnership with Mujeres de Corcovado is something I intend to do, and would be beneficial for all of us.

2) Once the tools and materials to be used are selected, set financial resources aside to account for a stock of materials that the artisans can continue to use after the project finishes.

3) Develop and include a parallel curriculum for children and youth, intertwining with the adults’ curriculum as much as possible, with a children’s facilitator collaborating during the workshops. As mentioned before, the children were not as integrated into the project as initially intended, mainly because there was no time or human resource to devote thought to creative education methodologies for children. Including a person involved in children’s education is key for this point.

4) Transition into a process of collective ownership of the project by engaging more stakeholders with diverse specializations; redefine and redesign curriculum with collaboration from an anthropologist, a social worker, a packaging designer, a product designer, a business administrator, and master artisans from each community. These can be co-facilitators of the workshops in their respective topics of expertise, while providing diverse perspectives.

5) Hire a producer, an administrator, and an external evaluator. During the project, my facilitative duties were complicated by production (setting up the workspace, procuring materials to work with, documenting, communicating about the project in social networks and organizing through whatsapp) and administrative duties, which caused me to feel overburdened. Evaluation should be done by a neutral person that is not involved in the project, so that the artisans do not feel compromised in
their evaluation of the process. I also recognize that my emotional involvement in the project might have affected the way in which I interpreted the information gathered, and ultimately the way in which I write about the outcomes.

6) Develop and implement more market research tools that the artisans can use (to develop and test new products and obtain client feedback). One of the problems that we identified is that it's risky to invest time in new products that might not be economically successful. Establishing safe spaces where experimentation and research and development can occur on a regular basis, while minimizing the economic risks of experimentation, is a requisite for the artisans to innovate and benefit economically. Strategies to minimize risks of innovation might be time-based: e.g. establishing a plan where 10% of their time is devoted to experimentation. However, this must go in hand with market research tools that can give them the confidence of taking on new directions. Creating commercial spaces where this innovation is encouraged is also a requisite, as many existing shops place orders based on the sale of conventional items, which means that they do not eagerly take the risk of displaying an experimental product.

7) Place a more continued emphasis on conflict management. Interpersonal conflict proved to be an important factor that limited their ability to concentrate and become more involved in their creative process. This conflict was not particularly located within the organization, but more around gender issues in their relationships with family members. Conflict management goes hand in hand with gender work, and particularly point 11 below.

8) Experiment and collaborate on developing intercultural design methods that are applicable in communities with non-western world views. Indigenous cosmologies are often based on non-linear thought, rely on oral or graphic more than written traditions in the transmission of knowledge and incorporate knowledges holistically (Wilson 2008). How can we work together to develop creative methods that go in line with this nature, and at the same time what can traditional graphic design methods bring to the table?

9) Ecological sustainability: a greater focus on environmental issues related to artisanal endeavors and needs to be placed to develop strategies that shift production towards more harmonious relationships with the environment. Experimenting with local, biodegradable and minimally processed materials is crucial to transforming relationships between production and environment, and artisans can play a key role in this process. Involving people from other professions and trades to aid in the research and development of these new strategies is important.

10) Advocacy work and lobbying using a multi-stakeholder approach is an urgent matter which the curriculum should also touch on, as obtaining municipal funding for communal activities can be complementary to the development of communal finance models. There is a lack of municipal resources dedicated to promoting culture in the region, and this limits the advancement of the artisanal sector as well. This partly has to do with a very low grassroots participation in Municipal politics, which limits the amount of resources that artisans and other cultural sectors can demand from municipalities, compromising the financial sustainability of communal initiatives.

11) More attention needs to be devoted to masculinities and seeking ways to integrate the men that are part of the artisans’ social networks into the conversation. Holding parallel men’s circles could potentially get men to reflect on the social construction of their masculinities and ways in which they can shift power structures that are damaging to themselves and their female companions / family members. According to existing literature on gender and subordinated masculinities, any efforts to empower women are likely to fail if men aren’t taken into consideration, because transforming gender roles is the responsibility of both men and women (Paulson 2016). More research needs to be devoted as to the most appropriate ways of attracting men into the conversation, as they normally do not participate in women’s projects.
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Short Bio

Florencia Lathrop Rossi is a designer, illustrator, and community organizer. She obtained a Master’s in Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) degree at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville, where she studied through a Fulbright grant. She enjoys exploring the intersections of collaborative design, co-creation, social movements and environment. She has worked as a professional illustrator, and worked for the Puerto Jiménez based non-governmental organization Asociación de Servicio Comunitario Nacional y Ambiental (ASCONA) as their 2016 coordinator of the Integral Program of Arts and Culture of the Osa Peninsula (PICA) in Puntarenas, Costa Rica. Here, she worked with grassroots organizations in Osa on art, culture, solidary economy, and agroecology as tools for social mobilization. She co-organized a three-day cultural festival in celebration of Earth Day in Drake Bay (April 2016), with Drake Bay’s chamber of tourism. She and other ASCONA members also partnered with NGOs, institutions and a local fisherwomen’s association (Asopez) in Rincón, to co-produce a cultural festival celebrating Mangrove Day (July 2016) with schoolchildren.

At UF she won the McQuown Award, offered by the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, for incorporating issues of social justice in her academic work. During her time at this institution she was an active member of the Latin American Studies working group Buen Vivir and Postdevelopment Pathways in Latin America, organized by political ecologist Dr. Susan Paulson. She collaborated in the organization of the Latin American Studies 67th Annual Conference on Buen Vivir and Other Post-Development Pathways (2018). She recently presented her MDP field practicum project in Colombia, where she participated in the II International Congress on Intercultural Dialogue in Abya-Yala, organized by the Latin American Society of Intercultural Studies (Solei) in Santa Marta.

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