

CRAFTS AND DESIGN CULTURES

BANASTHALI, INDIA

ANKA FALK, TATIANA TAVARES

The *Crafts and Design Cultures* workshop was held near Jaipur, Rajasthan. It was conducted in cooperation with the design department of the most important women's university in India, Banasthali University. The participating students included 18 female Bachelor students, among them six students from HyperWerk, most of them in their final year of Bachelor studies.

The concept, planning, and supervision were conducted by Anka Falk, working with the workshop directors Professor Himadri Ghosh and Tatiana Tavares, and workshop assistant Eliane Gerber.¹ Organisers and co-directors were Professor Joshi and Professor Hamsavahini Singh. All hands-on courses were conducted by members of the faculty, assistants and craft experts.

THE WORKSHOP

The workshop connected students and lecturers with the purpose of creating a platform for exploring hands-on Indian crafts, followed by daily afternoon discussions. The workshop was embedded in the framework of the »hands-on week« taking place every year in Banasthali. Teams of Indian and Swiss students formed central basic structures during the workshop sessions and leisure time activities to promote a close personal contact between students. The individual or group work carried out in each of these courses was geared towards producing concrete final crafted products, which were later displayed in an exhibition. The Swiss students also visited the Kadhi Center based on the campus, in which threads and fabrics are produced from cotton and sewn together in the tradition of Gandhi, performed by women who live in the villages surrounding the campus.² Before the workshop, the students from HyperWerk spent two days in Jaipur, visiting the city and the village of Bagru (a village well-known for its rich tradition of textile and wood block printing), in order to become accustomed to the new environment and craft techniques.

On the basis of the summaries the students had produced beforehand, which included a dossier about a local craft of their own culture and individual research interests, students were allocated to the different courses offered during the workshop week among the 17 courses available. These were:

- *Healthy Food Cooking*. Outline of traditional Indian cuisine from different regions in India.
- *Craft Furniture*. Production of simple wicker seating furniture and couches.
- *Space Design*. Usage scenarios for a courtyard of the campus, later presented in a model.
- *Metal-Based Tabletop Accessory*. Designing and realising table accessories, such as placemats.
- *Dance Costumes – Rajasthani Garments*. Designing and realising models of dance costumes on the basis of traditional Indian dance costumes.
- *Wearable Accessories*. Production of jewellery and accessories from waste fabric.

METHODS

A series of methods were used during the workshop as means to create a dialogue between the practical and the cultural experience. A process of immersion through making, first-hand observation, a series of group discussions, coaching sessions, and an assignment (described in the Tour Study guide) provided for the students were the main strategies used.



Exploring the campus. Photograph by A. Stauffer, 2016

IMMERSION THROUGH MAKING

The workshop was characterised by immersion, acquisition of crafts, and first-hand observation. The setting invited students to experience Indian craft and culture by working with materials, following one another through practical activities and cultural exchange.

FIRST-HAND OBSERVATION

Students were encouraged to take notes and discuss their observations, even if they might reveal stereotypes or judgements. This allowed an open dialogue about design cultures and culture-bound perspectives. These observations were the basis for group discussions and coaching sessions.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND COACHING

Students were presented with specific issues and design- and/or culture-related questions which they discussed with lecturers during and after the activities. In group discussions students talked about their specific interests, research foci and experiences from the workshop. Discussions ranged from a general exchange about the notions of culture, cultural rootedness and affiliation to feedback given by each student about their experience and aspects of the »foreign« while being with their teams. Coaching was applied to support students in linking their experiences to their own research interests (especially those who were working on diploma projects).

THE ASSIGNMENT

A Tour Study Guide described the assignment students would need to fulfill after taking part in the workshop and after reflecting their experience. The task included keeping a journal during the stay in India (according to the Travel Kit) and to transform their observations and reflections into an artefact after their return. The aim of the documentation was to reflect the workshop using designing methods rather than analysing it from a critical distance.³

SUMMARY AND CRITICAL REMARKS

ASSIGNED ROLES AND HIERARCHY — Assigned roles, hierarchy and mutual exotisation were clearly part of the workshop experience. Some students pointed out the importance of hierarchy in Banasthali and Indian culture in general, where instructors are accorded authority and their judgement is rarely put into question by students. Another aspect affecting the interaction between the instructors and the students was the way the Indian hosts understood the roles of hosts and guests: Indian hospitality provides for treating guests in a manner as courteous as possible so that they do not have to think and make more choices than is absolutely necessary. It must be considered that culture-immanent concepts such as politeness and respect may have complicated or limited the exchange.



Metal-Based Tabletop Accessory workshop. Photograph by I. Baumgartner, 2016



Block printing workshop. Photograph by N. Fankhauser, 2016

AFTERNOON DISCUSSION SESSIONS

In addition to the time dedicated to the individual crafts during the courses, group sessions in the late afternoon gave the students the opportunity to exchange their experiences. The exchange taking place during these times was not limited to the topic of the workshop itself but turned out to be an important »vessel« for facilitating communal exchange between the participants. It must be considered valuable, not least due to the feedback given by the students, that the sessions facilitated an open



Space design workshop. Photograph by A. Stauffer, 2016



Afternoon discussion sessions. Photograph by A. Stauffer, 2016

exchange about assumptions held about »the others«, about values and conventional norms inherent in one's own and the others' culture as well as in the corresponding design cultures. In general, students reported that when they were engaged in an exchange about differences, limits were negotiated so that a certain degree of social cohesion could arise.

EXPERIENCING CRAFTS AS DESIGN CULTURES

The topic of crafts – and especially crafts in India – has considerably greater potential than could possibly be exploited within the framework of this workshop. Indian

Crafts evoke great fascination and a sense of longing in the Western visitor. The projections on Indian crafts are marked by a certain romanticism caused by the materiality, the relation to time and space (slow-motion, rootedness in a locality, originality and uniqueness of product, emotional factors). For Indians, crafts are a crucial part of their culture, which is severely challenged by globalization, changes in the Indian society and its consequences. They are a unique and rich resource and expression of cultural identity and thus part of the manifold design cultures in India.

The complex relationship of crafts, social systems, and cultural identity would offer a lot for deeper exploration and encounter. Yet, the workshop confronted students with severe cultural differences in design understanding and beyond, which enabled especially the Swiss students who were exposed to the different cultural space to reflect their own culture-bound perspective. They realized e.g. the relevance of emotional approaches, of myth and tradition in Indian design understanding, and the reassuring strength of one's cultural identity by certain aesthetics (symbols, ornaments, colors).

Any culture is a complex web which requires a deeper sense of immersion and time. We are well aware that we were only able to scratch the surface. Nonetheless, this experience promoted a setting for questions to emerge and opened up ways of negotiating relationships, designerly ways of knowing, and cultural interactions. Further workshops conducted in the follow-up phase were dedicated to the exchange of experiences within the group. These workshops proved to be both useful and desired by the students and went beyond the individual reflections to be undertaken by them in their documentation assignments. When the students were discussing experiences, it was possible to name mutual projections and realize our need to create narratives out of observations while seeking for sense and meaningfulness in a foreign cultural context. To be aware of this is a starting point.

NOTES

1. While the workshops were taking place in Banasthali, Anka Falk studied forms of and opportunities for coaching and supervision over spatial distances. The results of this study are presented later in this volume.
2. It was not only due to the fact that the workshop topic was geared towards practical design activities but also because arguably, in a first-time contact, Indian culture can have an overwhelming and a highly engaging effect, thus making it difficult to take a distant analytical stance of observation.
3. These workshops are part of the social commitment in favour of the needy undertaken by Banasthali University.
4. The following article by Himadri Ghosh *Educating an Awareness of the Impact of Indian Lifestyles on Craft Traditions* gives a glimpse of this. Primarily, it shows the connection between calligraphy and various materials.