

Teaching-Learning Experiences in Interior Architecture in the Context of Creative Economy and Socially Responsible Design

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Abstract

The contemporary aesthetics of globalization has broken the modern idea of Interior Design and Architecture as a peripheral area dedicated to superfluous ornamentation without social, economic or political meanings. The creative economy and new emergent demands of the social and economic context for innovation and re-conceptualization of spaces and objects have now located these among of the key icons in the material culture as providers of added value in economic, functional, social and symbolic terms [1]. Thus, the Interior Architecture team of the Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP), Mexico, began to seek for new areas of opportunity for Interior Architecture to give it a renewed strength to face the contemporary, globalizing world and its demands considering also the local urgent needs to be responded through sustainable design. Thus, projects carried out in design workshops exposed in this paper, propose to break barriers that previously had maintained Interior Architecture and Design in the architectural periphery. The global creative economy and local spatial problematics are challenges that design education has to face successfully through renovated curricula, course and exercise contents but also through innovative teaching-learning methods to trigger a development of an innovative, locally sensible and socially responsible material culture promoting creative strategies and methods of production.

Keywords: Design education, Interior Architecture, re-signification, creative economy, globalization.

1. Introduction

During the influence of the Movement of Modern in Architecture of the 20th century, Interior Architecture was condemned to the periphery of architectural thinking, considering it superficial without a real cultural, artistic or aesthetic importance; it was labelled as meaningless decoration without a real political or economic impact on societies. With the recent emergence of new cultural and economic tendencies and ways of life, the image of the interior of the architectural space has become an powerful tool for branding and promotion of the corporative and individual image.

The contemporary re-positioning of Interior Architecture has been very rapid and not quite assimilated by the Interior Architecture education and the public in general, especially in a country like Mexico, where the discipline is still rejected as decoration. Thus, the Interior Architecture program of the Universidad de las Américas Puebla, Mexico, has developed educational strategies to insert this discipline to new areas of opportunity taking advantage of the economic and productive context of globalization. The idea of the expanded opportunities and possibilities of Interior Architecture in the contemporary world, UDLAP design workshops proposed to break barriers through expanded knowledge informed by authors such as Joseph Alois Schumpeter, Richard Florida, Vilém Flüsser and George Yudice.

In the context of Mexico, Interior Architecture has to have also a strong compromise with a socially responsible design considering vulnerable groups of population. This means a completely new optics compared with the traditional disciplinary outcomes but also opportunities for innovation to attend social demands through new strategies and technologies in the design of habitable spaces. Thus emerges the experimentation with *habitable objects*, designed and produced through digital technology to be light, transportable and removable solutions apt for mass production through industrial processes. This kind of object-spaces are able to respond to different demands from the global to the local, from interiors for advanced mobility systems to spaces for health, education and social services for vulnerable social groups in developing countries.

2. Just to begin with...a little bit of theory

Joseph Alois Schumpeter introduced the idea of innovation as economic force already in 1911 defining innovation as dynamics able to trigger a change dismantling the existing realities in order to create something new [2, 3, 4]. Although Schumpeter had focused his discourse strictly on economy, the globalization of the late 20th and the early 21st century extended the need for innovation beyond

the traditional production of goods and services, to respond to the demands of taking advantage of creative forces in the sustainable development and generation of wellbeing and prosperity through *creative economy* and *creative industries*.

Richard Florida [5] visualized different branches of design as essential part of the core group of creative industries as forces triggering innovation, including Interior Architecture. Schumpeter had already predicted the emergence of the necessity for developing commercial mechanisms for the exploitation of the outcomes of innovation that today exist under the title of *branding* [2] or creation of imaginaries. As also George Yudice pointed out, the concept of a brand is based on a constant redefinition of meanings [6] responding to the commercial demands of creation of new contents able to trigger novelty imaginaries, symbols and narratives [7]. We can then connect this theory framework to the definition of Flüsser [8] of design as a process of signification in which objects and spaces acquire renewed characteristics to efficiently respond [1] to the contemporary necessities of habitation.

Schumpeter and then Florida stimulated the emergence of new ideas about the economic and social development promoting the vision of the creativity as a crucial sphere for investment as an activated economical resource for creative industries [6] and as a motor of change thanks to the contents and added value it generates [9, 10]. In these terms, Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) visualized creative industries, or creative economy, as a force to trigger a social, economic and political deal to guarantee sustainable development [10, 11, 12]. Interior Architecture surprisingly, has now the opportunity to become an important piece in an economic structure.

3. Approaching creative economy and social responsibility through design workshops

How to introduce students to these new dynamics of creativity as a productive force? The task began by exploring the role of creative industries and design in creative economy as indicators of the level of national creativity in countries like Singapore [13, 14] and South Korea [15], and as tools for the re-engineering of their image as economically vigorous and productively innovative and efficient nations. Cases of Minneapolis (2013) [16] and Philadelphia (2010) [17] were also studied, because of their strategies of promoting good design among the population discovering that one of the strategies that could be used was to take high quality designs (no necessarily expensive ones) to meet the public in transportable urban modules, far from exclusive boutiques and special stores.

Students were asked to re-signify one of the most common objects, a chair, understanding that this very simple object may have many different meanings and uses: as a utilitarian object, a brand furniture transmitting meanings of social class or even as *design art* exposed in museums, galleries and biennials [18]. Combining the previously mentioned case studies, the creative process in the workshop began by designing a chair collection as a brand, based on the design art concept. After that, a transportable, removable and adaptable architectural container, a habitable object, was designed for the exposition of the chair collection in exterior and interior spaces, in Mexico and abroad, no matter the conditions. The collection had to promote novelty narratives of Mexico as an innovating country with a potential to make important contributions to the contemporary life and material culture in the context of globalization. Students had to experiment different material, structural, assemblage, budget and transportation alternatives through digital prototyping and fabrication, besides considering specific interests and demands of the potential sponsors that might be interested in promoting themselves through the travelling expository. The design process certainly launched students beyond the conventional concepts of their discipline.

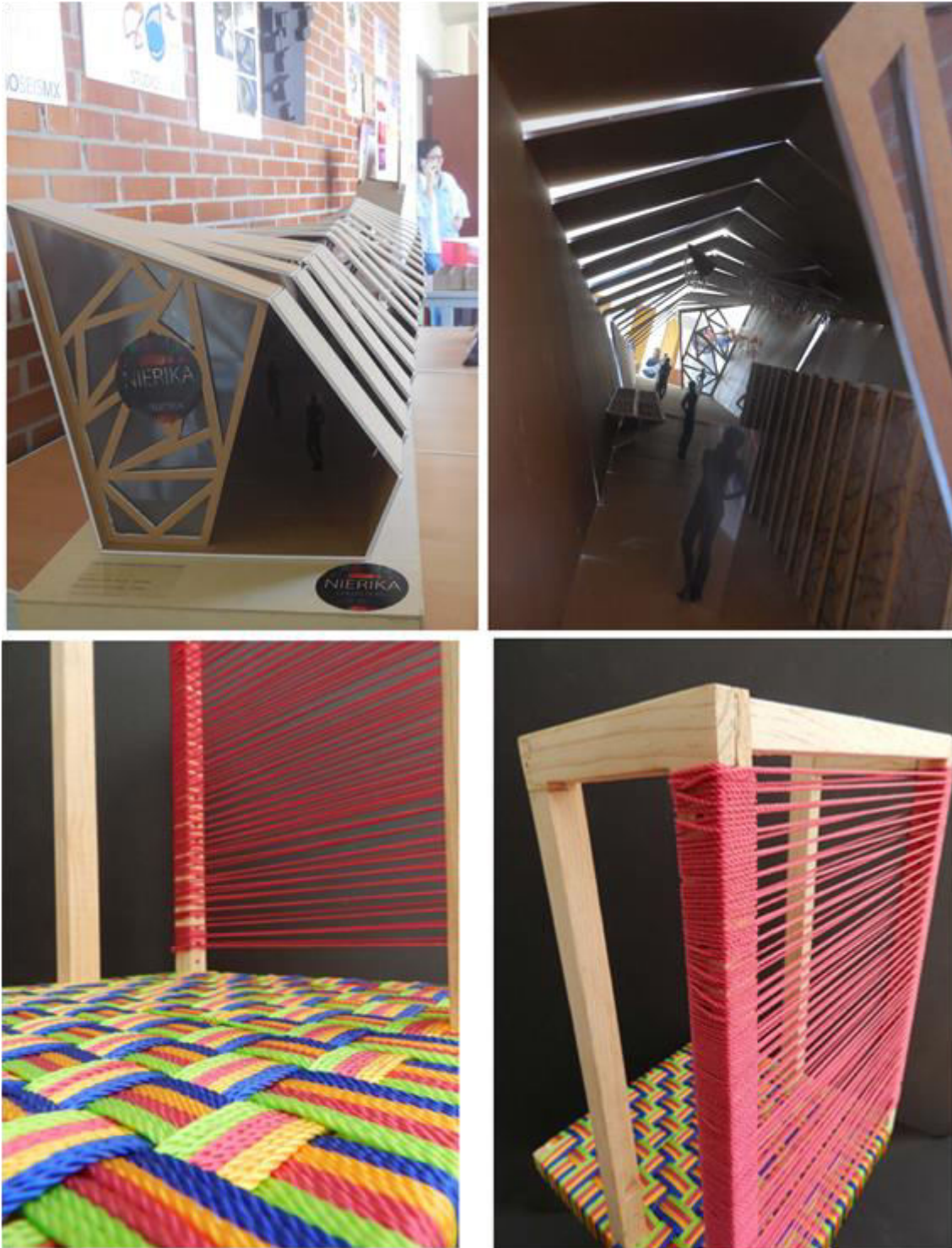


Fig.1. Expository and some of the chairs it sheltered (Photo of the student work: author, 2015).

After focusing the workshop on highlighting the role of Interior Architecture in creative economy, creative industries and innovation, the issue of innovation from the stance of social responsibility was tackled as a focus point adopting the idea of creative economy managed through a social, economic and political deal mentioned by Fonseca Reis [11]. In these terms, the work of Richard Florida suggested to take on the role of designer as a *problem seeker*, not only as problem resolver [5]. Thus, a severe social problem affecting a certain community or group of people living in whichever part of the world should be identified and analyzed. The detected problematics extended from inadequate spaces for basic medical care in inaccessible Mexican communities, precarious



quality of life in the refugee camps and even problems of water provision and supply in Central Africa. Thus, students had to propose easily transportable, cheap and dismantlable habitable objects that could offer improvement to the quality of life of the selected users and test the viability of their proposals through prototyping. Students had to resolve also a mounting guide to be given to the final user considering that this may be illiterate and a promotional strategy and material was designed to be presented to governments or international organizations such as the Red Cross, World Health Organization (WHO) or the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) potentially interested in the project.

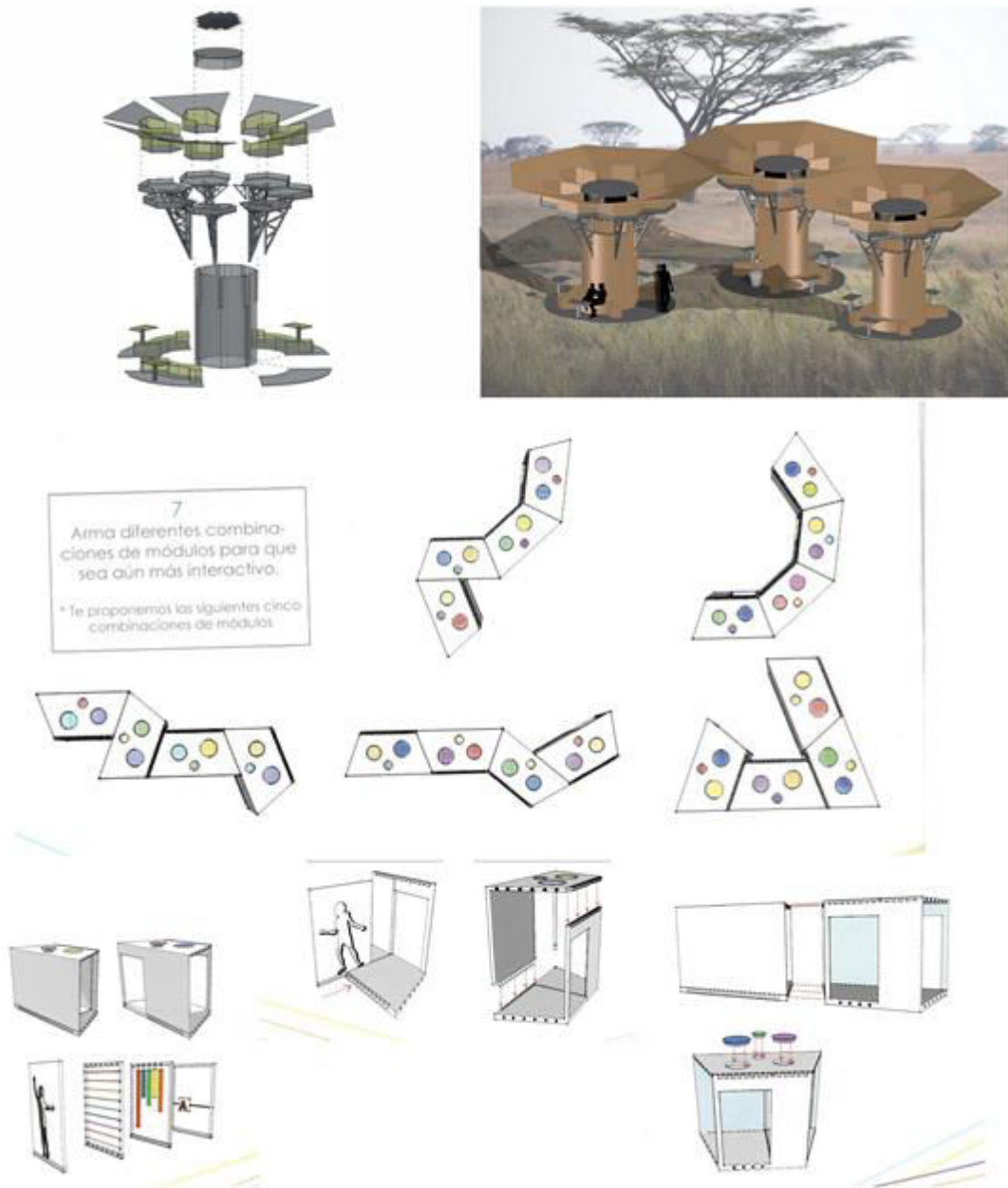


Fig.2. Above: A rainwater collector and a tribal meeting place for Southern Sudan; below: transportable device for early education (stimulation) for disadvantaged villages of Mexico (Digital images: Student work, 2017). The design outcomes were to comply three main criteria: innovation, aesthetics and functionality.

4. Conclusion

Re-conceptualizing Interior Architecture as an important part of the core group of the contemporary creative economy highlights its potential in propelling the economic development through adoption of innovative strategies, methodologies, dynamics and themes. Experimenting the framework of creative economy in the education of Interior Architecture has resulted to be an interesting and refreshing experience reinforcing the disciplinary identity. Expansion of learning to the relation between Interior Architecture and creative industries has permitted exploring the possibilities for extending the disciplinary field beyond its accustomed limits. Now, besides attending demands and necessities for comfort, wellbeing and quality of life, Interior Architects should be seeking for opportunities emerged from the demands for economic, technological, political and social processes of globalization without forgetting the emergency to reinforce their social responsibility and their capacity to respond to all kinds of needs through creativity and innovation.

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