The Benefits of Organizing International Design Workshops to Gain a Deeper Understanding of the Local Context

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A fundamental feature of international or cross-cultural workshops is the drive for learning about the others. In such workshops, being a tutor or student does not matter as all workshop participants share the same curiosity to find out about different life experiences.

Such a workshop was undertaken in fall 2006 at the Department of Industrial Product Design, Istanbul Technical University (ITU) with the participation of the tutors and the students of the third-year Product Design Studio class (43 students in total). The workshop, “Private Water,” was among a series of activities planned under an international project initiated by Georg-Christof Bertsch, a design consultant and educator from Germany. The project defined as “Reflecting Waters” involves activities in Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, Israel; Peter Behrens School of Architecture, Düsseldorf, Germany; and Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey.

The workshop program started with an introductory lecture on the significance of water from the perspectives of different cultures and religions. This was followed by brief information on the Reflecting Waters project, its scope and content.

Following this lecture, Georg Bertsch started the workshop by explaining the procedure to be followed in the allocated period of time which was five work days. The first action was to form groups around two themes of the workshop which was defined as “in bath” and “mineral water.” Eight groups were formed to work on these two themes; four groups working on the first theme while the remaining four on the second one.

Following the formation of the groups, students in all the groups were given the task of taking at least 10 photos of all kinds of objects related to water in private and public spaces.

On the second day of the workshop, the photos were collected and formatted, renamed and the results were loaded on the project’s input files on the project server. These were prepared as four 15-minute PowerPoint presentations about different kinds of objects, such as bathroom applications, public fountains and so on. The discussions on these presentations were the most valuable part of the workshop and this constituted the source of inspiration for this paper.

The main positive aspect of these discussions relates to the efforts of explaining such as why in most of the Turkish bathrooms there are plastic seating units or water containers in the bathtubs, the reasons both cultural and religious for a special device for cleaning one’s body built in the water closets or specific patterns of bathing or cleansing, the origins of the forms of various water containers used in Anatolian houses. The act of explaining itself allows self-understanding and self-reflection as well as developing a critical view into one’s own culture.
The other positive aspects relate to the host country’s being a developing one. Then the question is, why is it so?

Like most of the developing countries, Turkey started her industrialization process on the basis of imported technologies. Like the technologies, design education was also imported as part of a “modernist development paradigm” (Bonsiepe, 1991; Er, 1994). As stated elsewhere (Er, 1991; Er, H. A., 1994; Er and Er, H. A., 2006), “long before the new product design needs of the Turkish industry materialized, industrial design schools had been planned in order to meet the future demand which was expected to emerge as a result of the import substituting industrialization strategies implemented in Turkey in the 60s and 70s”.

The ethos of modernization meant that “the traditional” or “the local” were seen as inferior or simply ignored by the design education. As the design education was imported like the technology itself, its links with the local reality remained weak (Kaya and Er, 2007). The needs of the domestic market were usually ignored if they failed to match with the “modern” life style as imagined to be. In cases where there is a sizeable demand for “traditional” products, then the local producers created solutions for them adapted to the methods of mass production. However, these were labeled as “local” solutions and accepted to be of lesser quality than the “modern” alternatives. This was also a consequence that most of the local companies were producing products whose rights of production were given by the foreign licensors. Thus their mainstream business was to produce “transferred products” by using “transferred technology” (Er, 1995). This particular pattern of industrialization started to change by 1990s and at least in some sectors, Turkish companies have developed their own technologies and consequently innovative products.

It is a fact that only reaching to a certain level of self-confidence in terms of economic development and growth, developing countries start remembering or re-evaluating their own roots. This is also observed in Turkey. Thus, international workshops create an opportunity for self-reflection and making sense of the “local” context.

On the other hand, the search for one’s own identity and for original concepts is a skill and this can be developed much more efficiently through constant dialogue with foreigners. In this respect, international workshops and student exchange are an important part of the education of future elites of the society.

Having outlined the positive aspects of the initial discussion stage on the photos taken by the students as their first workshop task, let’s go back to the following stages of the workshop.
On the basis of classroom discussions on the materials presented, decisions were taken about which objects to focus in order to reconsider or redesign them. The groups then started the creative process by doing sketches and mock-ups, creating 3-D files and storing them in the project files.

During this stage, the students were also given the homework of calling up their parents and grandparents for water stories ("I remember, when I was young, water was…/we had to get water from…; we carried water in…etc.").

These stories were listened and the groups' work looked into to find names for newly designed objects. Following a method of active and continuous engagement, the students were ready for final presentations.

Eight groups produced eight projects plus an additional one by an exchange student. These were shared by all the participants and the workshop was ended by a student organized party in the particular class that the workshop was held.
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Before glass was easily and cheaply produced, stoneware jugs, crocks, and bottles were used for food storage in the home.

Ceramic anforas were used by the ancient Romans to transport wine or oil or even grains across their wide empire. They were placed in the holds of their oar and sail-propelled ships, nestled snugly among the stones they used as ballast.
The fact that 43 students took part in this five-day workshop trying to create design solutions with a global appeal by getting inspiration from the local habits and material culture has been the major benefit of this workshop. Having 43 students in one class alone can be considered as a local peculiarity. This was a matter of concern thus decision prior to the workshop. The local partner of the project decided that the experience of an international workshop should be shared by all the students in that particular class. This was a challenging decision that proved to be an appropriate one in the light of the visible and invisible outcomes.
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