

# A journey toward *Sublime*: a reflection on the influence of education values in design practice

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In 1994 we came to the United Kingdom from Argentina as young design professionals in search of opportunities our country could not provide due to a prolonged period of political and financial instability. At the time, little did we know that our educational heritage would colour and guide the development of our design practice in the UK throughout the years to come. Ours is a journey of lineage, beginning with the worldviews and teachings that were first introduced at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm (HfG), and then advanced at the Universidad Nacional de La Plata (UNLP) in Argentina where we studied.

The philosophy of Ulm had a great influence on design education and design discourse in Latin America (Fernández 2006). During the 1960s and '70s, design in Argentina (and other Latin American countries) was at the centre of a socio-political project for economic autonomy that sought to stimulate rapid development through industrialisation, in order to decrease fiscal deficit by reducing imports. To achieve this, it was necessary to create skilled jobs; and consolidating the design profession (both practice and education) became crucial if the country was to become this kind of economically competitive nation.

At that time, the HfG was advancing the notion of 'design leadership' as a way to push for systemic change, dismissing the idea that design was purely an applied form of aesthetics (which was felt diminished the role of the designer) and advocated for design to be viewed as an applied human and social science (Findeli 2001). As such, the Ulm model was seen as highly relevant to the Argentine context because it offered an operative, concrete and systematic way to implement the independence-through-industrialization that Latin America was seeking (Fernández 2006). Emerging university departments and programmes in design across Latin America were keen to adopt this view of design as 'a science that could support industrialisation', which was regarded as instrumental to the continent's social, cultural and economic success (Fernández 2006).

However, this vision for socio-economic autonomy was never fulfilled, due to the political turbulence that Argentina (and the continent) suffered during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Starting in 1975, Argentina endured a long, dark period of harsh, consecutive authoritarian military governments that culminated with the Falklands War in 1983. During the 'de facto' (dictatorship) years, educational institutions became highly politicised as students and staff persistently engaged in public protests and demonstrations, demanding the reinstatement of a democratic government. In an attempt to control dissent, the 'junta' (a military group leading the authoritarian government) implemented deep reforms within the universities, thwarting critical thinking by closing down those departments in the arts and social sciences they considered to be threats. Hundreds of students, staff and other intellectuals – including journalists, writers, rights activists and artists – were relentlessly targeted during the 'dirty war'. Many were assassinated, abducted or forced into exile (Moyano 1995).

## Our student years at UNLP

By 1987, the year we begin our journey as design students, democracy was still young and political stability was unpredictable. In the city of La Plata, students from the Fine Arts college had been abducted and tortured just a few years earlier, following a peaceful demonstration for reduced bus fares – the infamous *Noche de los Lápices* (Hernández 2011). For us, even enrolling in the Visual Communication Design course at UNLP during this time was a risky political act. Ahead of us lay not only a five-year multidisciplinary course in design, but also hopes for the reconstruction of our country's identity and trust in its political institutions. We were "freshers" in the university, but also in a whole new era in Argentine history.

In contrast, the Design faculty at UNLP was well established (Figure 2.1), and our course was celebrating its 25th anniversary that year. Founded at the University in 1963, it was said that 'the seeds of the Bauhaus had germinated in Argentina' but the programme and style of study at UNLP drew heavily on the views and methods of the HfG in Ulm (Rollie 1987). The 'Ulm-UNLP' connection was made



**Figure 2.1** Courtyard and corridors of the Facultad de Bellas Artes, Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina. Image: courtesy of UNLP. Santamaria Media.

through a direct link between the founding professors and the visionary Argentine painter and philosopher, Tomás Maldonado, who held the post of rector at the HfG between 1956 and 1966. Maldonado's affiliation with both institutions meant a fluid exchange took place between the HfG and the design school at UNLP. Argentine students who visited Ulm returned to Argentina with new ideas. Faculty members of the HfG established contacts with Latin American universities; they participated in programmes at UNLP and other Latin American universities and helped shape an emerging design profession throughout Latin America (Fathers 2003; Fernández 2006).

For example, German designer Gui Bonsiepe collaborated closely with Maldonado at the HfG, and in 1964 he was invited to work with him in Argentina:

I was invited to Argentina by my teacher, friend, and intellectual mentor, Tomás Maldonado, whom I considered one of the most important design theoreticians of the twentieth century – a real giant, though his works weren't widely known outside the Spanish and Italian language context.

(Fathers 2003: 44)

Bonsiepe moved to Chile in 1968, following the closure of the HfG, and he worked extensively in Brazil, Argentina and Mexico for over four decades. Along with Maldonado, Bonsiepe is considered one of the most important figures associated with the HfG influence on Latin American design discourse and education (Fathers 2003).

At UNLP, the Ulm influence was rooted in three fundamental concepts, which shaped Maldonado's tenure at the HfG, and also resonated with the emerging socio-cultural context of Latin America:

- Technology and its impact on how we conceive of and practice design
- The relevance of culture and the social sciences in design education
- Design ethics – the relationship between design and consumer society

These concepts permeated and shaped the design curriculum at our school (Fernández 2006).

The Visual Communication Design course was implemented as a five-year programme of study. During the first three years, Visual Communication Design students shared most course modules with students from Product Design, and some with Stage Design and the Fine Arts. Along with the core Visual Communications Workshop module, which ran throughout the five years, we were taught Drawing, Visual Literacy, Design Methods, Technology and Materials and History of Design, and a modern European language (French, Italian, German or English). These were complemented by subjects that developed philosophical and critical thinking skills, such as History of Argentine Philosophy and Introduction to Cultural and Media Studies.

Silvia Fernández, our senior lecturer and mentor (who later married Gui Bonsiepe) was among the founders, and central to the development of the Visual Communication Design programme. In an article published in 1987 by *tipoGráfica* magazine celebrating the degree's 25th anniversary, she recounts:

We believe that the breadth of teaching staff should reflect the broadness of the Visual Communication Design degree; a pioneering concept determined by the visionary founders of this school. For that reason, the team includes, for example, professionals in cinematography, who introduce new variables

to the visual field: time and motion, key elements in the visual expression of today, arising from the application of new technologies.

(Fernández 1987: 4; all translations from the Spanish by the authors)

As at Ulm, there was little interest in the 'artistic' dimensions of design. Instead, the 'scientific' content of the curriculum was emphasised. Subjects such as Physics, Mathematics and IT were included, but the main contributions came from the Human and Social Sciences – Gestalt Psychology, Semiotics (the study of signs and symbols as communication) and Ergonomics, as well as Systems Thinking and Philosophy of Science (Neves and Rocha 2013).

In practical terms, the design thinking method upon which the workshop activities were developed was based on an understanding of design as a problem-solving activity:

The constant problem framing, research and synthesis cycle followed by the students, either working individually or in groups, comes to shape the learner's own method, tailored by the student herself to fit her own view and vision, and refining it along the entire course by applying it to varying degrees of complexity.

(Fernández 1987: 5)

This statement emphasises a methodological, non-artistic approach. However, this 'scientific' approach was not based on pure rationalist thinking, because it acknowledged other 'ways of knowing' such as intuition and lived experiences.

We cannot rely on rational knowledge only, but we must also appeal to sensitive memory and intuition, which are inseparable components of our nature as individuals. Design thinking is certainly not linear, it is holistic, and resorting to the sensory world stimulates an exchange between reality and the designer's own sensory experience of it, thus enriching the outcome.

(Fernández 1987: 5)

Also, the methodological approach was instrumental to a goal, which was to develop in students the ability to 'read' and transform our local reality as future design professionals.

Our role is to focus on and frame the local problematic so that we can better serve our communities. Therefore, in the field of communications, the aesthetic decisions we make are not arbitrary – they must emerge from a deep understanding of the process of signification, which, of course, can only be conceived within a contextualized and concrete socio-cultural reality.

(Fernández 1987: 5)

Therefore, the learning objectives were aimed at the formation of character, rather than the development of technical skills or abilities alone.

We understand that freedom, knowledge of one's identity, knowledge of reality and the ability to transform it, are the main learning objectives that contribute to form our graduates' 'social being' and ethics. The way to achieve these goals is none other than that of 'teaching to learn'. Hence, we encourage self-knowledge, a creative attitude and build transformational capacity. The students then become the protagonists of their own training, which tears apart the traditional model where that role is played by the professor. The teacher, now, is a mentor who guides the process of 'being-and-doing' while the students methodically self-exercise *thought* and *action*.

(Fernández 1987: 5)

This ideology was supported pragmatically through the promotion of teamwork, mentorship and interdisciplinarity.

We believe that the practice of visual communication design is, by nature, an interdisciplinary activity. Be it in the analysis and diagnostic of the problematic or in the development of solutions, it is necessary to engage interdisciplinary teams. We know that, due to budgetary constraints, the economic situation in our country prevents us from conducting our practice in this manner. However, this does not change the intrinsic nature of our practice.

(Fernández 1987: 4)

Collaborations and close relationships were fostered, and as students we felt nurtured and valued as individuals – a real challenge in practical terms, considering the large size of our classes. The Design Workshops, for example, could include up to 200 students at any one time. Claudio Pousada, a former graduate, recalls:

Acknowledging that memory is selective, I insist in thinking that perhaps it's that special microclimate floating in the classroom that ultimately sums up the particular characteristic of this course. . . . It was that close relationship between teacher-student (not always idyllic) that nurtured the learning experience, which even today, with a fabulously multiplied student roll has not been lost.

(Pousada 1987: 6; translation from the Spanish by the authors)

Although our design activities engaged with the local context, the university ensured that we did not operate in silos. The workshop activities were enriched by encouraging students to continually build connections with other areas of knowledge; various guest speakers were invited to inspire students to forge new relationships and connections that contributed to the development of our projects. Jorge Frascara and Norberto Chavez were among the regular visiting lecturers, and the university facilitated access to exhibitions in Buenos Aires – Shigeo Fukuda, Alan Fletcher, and Milton Glaser among others – to ensure that our local practice and education were situated within the global design discourse.

The final year was dedicated to the development of an elective specialism – Corporate Identity, Packaging, Editorial Design or Audio-visual (Film) Studies – which took the form of a practice-based research project and a written thesis with oral defence. The important requirement here was that it should be rooted in a 'real life' problem.

In the final year, the student faces the solution of a problem of communication detected at the national, regional or local level. This project must be inserted in reality, with an established public or private commissioner, who should contribute to oversee the feasibility of the solution provided, in all aspects of implementation.

(Fernández 1987: 4)

By 1992, we graduated holding what we felt – and still feel – is a visionary, ambitious and pioneering degree from a non-fee-paying university. This course had not only prepared us to approach design as a methodological (as opposed to a 'black box') creative discipline, but those formative years had also taught us how to take an active part in the reality we were in, engaging in both action and intellect.

Two former students in their final year at the time reflect:

We lived the instability of a transitional period of normalization that has not yet ended – learning to participate as active citizens in a fledgling democracy, with its problematic of national reality, such as teacher strikes, into which our faculty is inserted. But at this stage, what we are most concerned about is the near future: our insertion in a society that barely recognises our profession. We are well aware of the vast knowledge we have gained during this time – hard going and, at times, more full of criticism than praise. A question worth asking is perhaps, have we learned this through the course, or alone, by necessity? Perhaps the distinction doesn't matter anyway. We can confidently say that these five years' experiences have borne some fruit. However, we know, despite the uncertainties we face, that we are prepared to face the reality 'on the street'.

(Alimenti and Christiansen 1987: 6; translation from the Spanish by the authors)

Leaving the course as young graduates, we were idealistic, full of hope and ready to work and bring about change, but the socio-economic climate in Argentina was highly volatile. Argentina's inflation rate had reached breath-taking proportions, giving rise to a wave of food riots in 1989 when inflation peaked at over 20,000 per cent (March 1989 – March 1990) (Brooke, 1989; Cavallo and Cavallo, 1996). Ronald Shakespear, founder of one of the most respected design consultancies in Buenos Aires, recalls: 'Printers' estimates were only good for a few hours. Estimating the cost of jobs for clients required impossible strategic skills, political and economical knowledge, and a huge nose to assess the future. Getting paid was just as difficult' (Shakespear 2009).

Even middle-class families were struggling to make ends meet. For young design graduates like us, job prospects were extremely limited. Feeling overqualified and constrained, we decided to leave Argentina for a while and explore opportunities abroad.

## Living our values: our work as design practitioners in the UK

The mid 1990s in the UK was, in our eyes, 'design heaven'. In 1994, the British Design Council celebrated its 50th anniversary. There was economic prosperity and the value of design to the economy in the UK was formally acknowledged with the term 'creative industries' (Flew 2012). For us, it was an ideal context in which to gain the much-needed work experience for our CVs.

Since we were going to be contributing our skills and time pro bono, we chose to volunteer for Wycliffe, an international charity that focuses on supporting literacy programmes to protect endangered languages (Figure 2.2). We were immediately captivated by the multicultural vibrancy of our new surroundings and the exciting opportunities that were open to us. We had state-of-the-art equipment at our disposal, and 24/7 access to the studio since we worked and lived at the organisation's headquarters. This self-contained, family-like environment proved ideal for us to adapt to a new culture, see our skills in a new light and gain confidence in our future as design professionals.

During this time, we kept in touch with colleagues in Argentina, and contributed articles to the Argentinian magazine *TipoGráfica*. This work opened doors for us into the London design scene, and we were able to gain insight into the UK design industry from influential figures like Seymour Powell, Wally Ollins and institutions such as the Design Council.



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Figure 2.2 *God Speaks Swahili*, poster designed for Wycliffe's fundraising campaign, 1996. Santamaria Media.

## Humble beginnings

In the year that followed, embracing the British lifestyle, we set up our own ‘micro consultancy’ (meaning we bought our first Apple Mac and we were working from home). These were booming times for design in London, but some people thought we were overconfident: we had limited local market experience and were not following the conventional design start-up path (i.e. we had neither the investment capital nor a portfolio with an impressive client list).

However, our education gave us grounds to feel well-equipped: we had been given solid professional skills and methods to be able to tackle a diversity of design projects – after all, as students we had learned to cope with a complex, unpredictable context and solve real-life problems by relying more on ingenuity than on resources. But, most importantly, we were given something that, for most, comes only after years of professional experience: the ability to view our profession and ourselves critically and reflectively, to be self-aware of our particular design philosophy (our purpose and our own way of seeing and acting in the world).

Although we set up our workspace at home, and regularly had clients over for supper, our commitment to standards remained intact, and we were able to offer a personable, yet highly professional service (see Figure 2.3). This ‘friendly’ and non-corporate approach to client liaison is common in Latin



Figure 2.3 “All in the Family”, feature article on Santamaria, Blueprint magazine, No.188. © October 2001. Santamaria Media.



America. However, in the UK the concept of creative living/working spaces was just starting to develop, and in this context our approach was perceived as rather refreshing. It also proved successful, and our commissions grew from graphic design projects to planning communication, branding and new product development strategies. We pitched for projects, often going against the grain to win a client, in competition with iconic agencies such as Saatchi & Saatchi, or being subcontracted for special projects by Ogilvy One among others.

Ultimately, what characterised our work was not the uniformity in aesthetic style, but our consistent, methodological and contextual approach to the design process that our tutors had imprinted on us. Our interest was to reach people in meaningful ways, and we purposely sought to develop our work by digging deep into the essence of each project in order to ground our aesthetic decisions on the client's core values, making manifest its uniqueness through design representation.

At the time, we knew little about methods of participatory design and co-creation. However, we were keen to involve clients in our process, and presented them with at least three choices, finished to a high standard; understanding that our role was not to impose or invent, but to 'envision' what clients could not readily articulate for themselves. This reflected our intention to engage them in dialogue and reflection; in a way, presenting them with 'mirrors' so they themselves could guide the process by choosing what resonated most with them.

As these methods and concepts became clearer to us, we published a design book in 2001, entitled *Santamaria – identity* (Figure 2.4). In this publication we put forward our conceptual approach to



**Figure 2.4** Santamaria – Identity, by Damian and Laura Santamaria. Art Books International, London © 2002. Santamaria Media.

design: 'identity comes from within', by reflecting on the parallels between a person's identity and that of a company or brand. The book helped to place our consultancy on the map of the UK design industry. But for us, it was an exercise of reflection that attempted to explore and make sense of two aspects of our professional reality: how to reconcile the design philosophy we inherited from our years of education (design as critical reflection and emancipation) and our commercial practice in the UK (an aesthetic preoccupation for market differentiation), which provided the financial means for our existence?

## In search of meaning and identity

Even while working for industry, designers must continue to assume their responsibilities to society. In no circumstances may their obligations to industry take precedence over their obligations to society.

(Maldonado 1977: 70; translation from the Spanish by the authors)

Although we had gained valuable experience and insights during our years of commercial design consultancy work, a conflict of interest started to emerge. We were good at what we were doing – i.e. the methods were consolidated, but the concept of design as an emancipatory, transformational discipline was still missing: the very basic premise that was foundational to our education in Argentina had given way to the need to make a living. We wondered: what sort of value are we creating and for whom? What kind of social project are we contributing our skills to? Is this 'responsible practice'?

As we became increasingly interested in seeking ways to create meaningful societal value (Frascara, Meurer, van Toorn, and Winkler, 1997), we invested time and effort into helping charities and non-profit organisations to bring their communications up to date by developing business-like strategies so they could fundraise more effectively. At the same time, we advised commercial clients to be bolder when communicating their purpose and values, so they could engage more meaningfully with their customers and employees. We found ourselves connecting both sides of the coin: trying to put a heart into commercial companies and giving a strategic brain to non-commercial organisations. Thus, a new chapter opened for us out of the realisation that both strands – strategy and social value – are needed to create meaning.

The social design discourse pioneered by Tomás Maldonado and Victor Papanek in the 1970s re-emerged in the new millennium. Maldonado had called for a new 'design hope' (Maldonado 1970), advocating for the social responsibility of designers. And once again, issues on design ethics, sustainability and the creation of social value were coming to the fore in design discourse as key aspects of the designer's role to bring about systemic change (Findeli 2001; Frascara et al. 1997; Manzini 1999; van Toorn 1998). By 2005, we were fully involved in developing brand and communication strategies for the emerging new wave of fair trade, ethical and sustainable enterprises. We felt that we had finally found our footing again, and that the 'cognitive dissonance' between our values and design practice was gone.

## In the flow

*If you want to change the world, first you have to change the media.*

—Damian Santamaria

While we realised creating brands and strategies for social and pro-sustainability enterprises was a step forward in our responsible design practice, we felt there was still potential for us to engage more deeply in societal change. As Papanek had stated: 'design can and must become a means for young people to take part in the transformation of society' (Papanek 1971). We were prompted to reflect once again on the meaning that statement held for us, and to ask ourselves 'what can we do, as visual communicators, to magnify the impact of an emerging contemporary social and sustainability discourse that is full of hope for societal transformation?' How can we contribute to the transition of society from a culture of consumption to a culture of sustainability? (Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013).

The values that were initially fostered by Maldonado, and which inspired UNLP staff – critical thinking, ethical responsibility, and an enduring commitment to the betterment of society – left a lifelong imprint on us that could not easily be disregarded. Following our interest in ethical and social issues, we embarked on the next challenge: to develop our own media platform that united design,



**Figure 2.5** *Sublime* magazine Issue 7, New Energy. *Sublime* is a lifestyle magazine for the 'new economy'. Its mission is to inspire influencer readers to advance social and environmental sustainability. [www.sublimemagazine.com](http://www.sublimemagazine.com) Santamaria Media.

communication and sustainability. This was our chance to put into practice the ideals and values we had been mulling over for more than a decade.

The result was a platform for communicating social and environmental sustainability values to mainstream audiences. In short, we used our design-thinking skills to build an enabling platform for peer collaboration driven by a common goal: the envisioning of a new model of society. This was achieved by reframing the values of the environmentalists of the 1960s and '70s (an interdependent, resilient, sustainable and egalitarian model of society), by using the graphic language and cultural codes of contemporary, glossy, mainstream lifestyle magazines, so they could be rediscovered and reinterpreted in the context and perspective of a post-consumerism generation.

Our magazine *Sublime* was launched in the UK in 2006, and was cast as 'the first international sustainable lifestyle magazine' with distribution in over 30 countries (Figure 2.5). Aligning ethics and aesthetics, it soon became a pioneering magazine genre that crystallised and captured the new social and environmental discourse in visually inspiring and intelligent content, portraying a new way of living and caring, fostering new talent and communicating meaningful values, which the traditional glossy magazines had relinquished long ago.

## Passing it on

*Design is not a profession, it's an attitude.*

—László Moholy-Nagy

In order to build a like-minded community, we decided to open our workspace at home to *Sublime* collaborators, sharing family-cooked meals and building teamwork in an exchange of knowledge, skills and experience. We purposely mentored and nurtured new graduates (twelve to sixteen a year) by guiding, encouraging and providing them with opportunities to develop and pursue their own interests and values – just as we had been mentored and nurtured as young students throughout our design education.

We strongly believe that how we conceive design, and consequently how we choose to develop, or limit, ourselves in the role of designers, is formed during the education of our university years. Only by forming critical and responsible individuals can we have responsible professionals (Findeli 2001).

Drawing from our own experience and knowing that design values are acquired and must be nurtured (Manzini 2015), we dedicate time to academic activities with students: offering visiting lectures, workshops, portfolio surgeries, sponsoring student awards and exhibitions, as well as helping to develop new academic programmes in Sustainable Design, Branding, Social Innovation for Sustainability and Journalism courses.

## Conclusions

Our journey has taken us full circle: as in the HfG in Ulm, our Latin American design education conceived design as a tool for emancipation (Bonsiepe, 2006). At that time, Design was concerned with breaking

loose of its dependency on the global market, and supporting the development of an independent, resilient, sustainable and egalitarian model of society. In that, the socio-political setting under which design education was born in Latin America has become akin to the state of the world today. Although, as design students at the UNLP, we were perhaps within the last cohort to be educated under this social vision, the values proclaimed in its foundational context seem to us more relevant today than ever.

For us, limiting design to the realm of commercial work means a submission of our creative force, and with it, a diminishing of our potential capabilities to contribute to human flourishing (Ehrenfeld 2008). While it is true that we need to make a living, we certainly cannot afford to overlook the role of design as a powerful tool for influence, and the moral values, ideologies and worldviews that we inevitably contribute to endorse and legitimise by virtue of our practice (Julier 2014; Latour 2008).

Acknowledging the limited opportunities designers and other creative practitioners often have to make a living without compromising their values, we consider ourselves extremely privileged to have been given the invaluable skill of critical self-reflection, and a vision for aligning that critique to action so that, through our work, we can contribute to creating social value. In these times, there is little else we'd rather be doing.