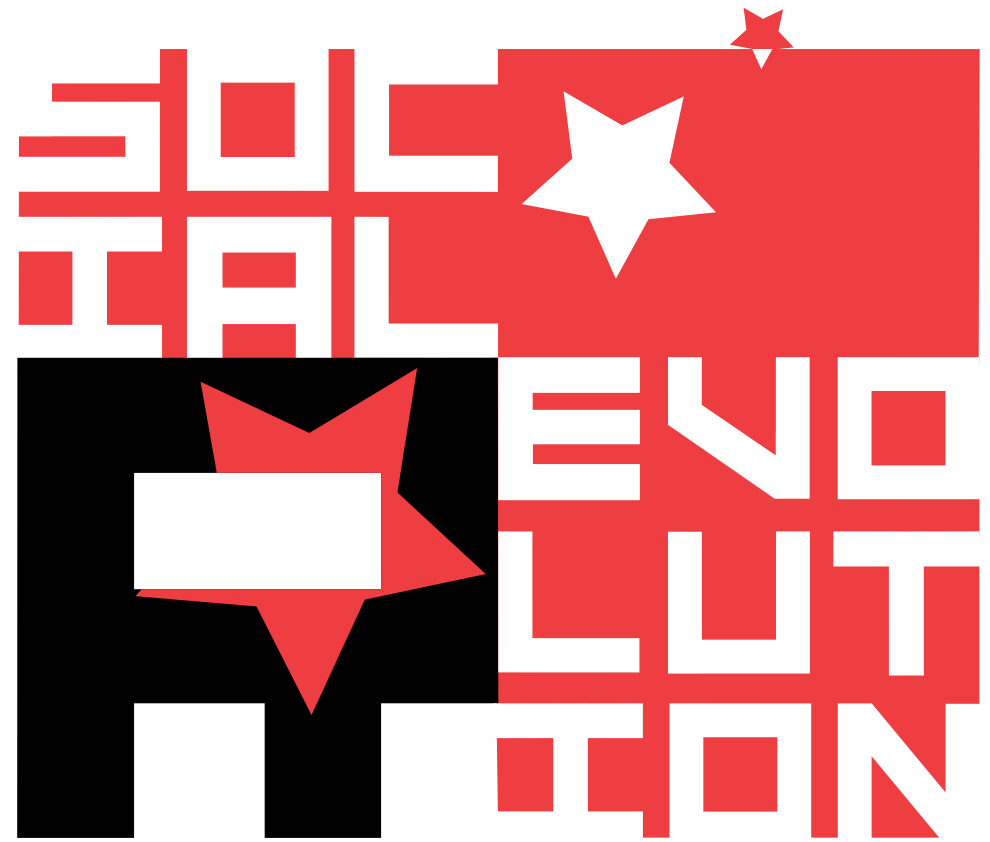


CHANNEL UNDO 09 SUMMER



Eugene Delacroix
Liberty Leading the People c.1830
(not originally with a pencil).



As words go, design is definitely amongst the softer ones, its meaning is open to numerous interpretations and although individual views may be highly defined, there is no consensus on its meaning. To some design is the fluff and icing, a final topping to give a bit of colour, and at the opposite end of the scale design is an intrinsic part of living, giving colour to the greyness of homogeneity. Neither of these views is wrong as design can be all these things, however when asked if design can be a driver or catalyst for social change, that is an altogether deeper question, as it asks whether the professional act of designing can of itself be a positive force for social change. □

We were invited to answer this by our International Design Partnership (IDP) partner in Mexico as part of our annual meeting. Their reason for asking was two-fold, firstly the pressure on brands to be more socially inclusive and also more conscientious on topics such as the environment and in some cases even human rights. The second reason was more direct and immediate, with the IDP being asked by a charitable foundation to assist in the development of a small artisanal community in Mexico's South East province of Yucatan.

Mayan Mystery

The community is situated in a rural area of the Yucatan, which in itself is consid-

ered less developed than more central or northern areas of the country. The population is predominantly of Mayan descent with the culture being a mix of the traditional Mayan overlaid with the more recent Spanish influence. The old Mayan language of quecha is still commonly spoken and many of their holidays are still observed. Recently there has been an upwelling of tourism as the area's famed pyramids, such as the temple pyramid at Chichen Itza have become more accessible and the interest in Mayan culture has exploded world wide, due in part to recent films such as Mel Gibson's 'Apocalypto', which showed the brutal suppression of the Mayans by the Spanish conquista-



The Pyramid at Chichen Itza



Example of the highly stylised Mayan stonework and the entrance to the church at Chichen Itza.

dors. Other films such as Tomb Raider and Spielberg's Indiana Jones series have also added mystique to the culture, giving new age tourists a destination which stills retains many mysteries and also has a strong spiritual element.



Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull.

The Challenge

Our brief, created by the foundation, which is largely funded by Banamex, one of Mexico's largest banks, was to design an identity which would bring the loose groupings of artisans under the umbrella of a new 'Mani' brand. The brand, in this case would act as the centre of the communication, with products being reinforced by having the assured sign of quality that the brand would bring. The brand also becomes the gateway for all the supporting communication, which

would be required to inform consumers of the uniqueness of the products, thus creating a story to give life to the brand.

However, this approach, although atypical for many businesses who are selling a product or service, did not feel appropriate in this instance. Prior to visiting the community we had been given a degree of background information on the community and the artisans. The community includes a number of highly skilled crafts-people, some of whom could easily be considered artists in their own right. The main and most traditional skills are those of embroidery and woodcarving. The tradition of embroidery dates back to early Mayan times and the passing on of the knowledge from mother to daughter has continued unbroken over centuries. The patterns used are both personally and communally historic.

The embroidered cloth is mainly used in the creation of 'huipils', (shown right) which are the traditional everyday Mayan dresses worn by the women of the area, with more intricate and delicate work being used on ceremonial or occasional wear, so wedding dresses or clothing for festivals .



A selection of images from Mani.



Images from our presentation to Banamex at the Hacienda Katanchal.

accessible

budget accessible

- 1. fully machine manufactured**
would be lower price point and patterns would also reflect the original piece
napkins, T-shirts, towels
- 2. part machine manufactured**
partly created on machine and then hand finished
limited edition table runners, wall hangings, framed works
- 3. fully hand made**
fully hand made pieces but from within the workshop
wall hangings, framed works
- 4. artist pieces**
one off pieces, created specifically as works of art.
signed framed works from individual artists
wall hangings, framed works



artista y artesanía

artists and artisans



Aboriginal Artists from the Desert Mob
Desert Mob is an aboriginal art organisation whose members are 100% wholly owned aboriginal art centres
The work presented ranges in value from \$ 150 to \$25,000.




Samples slides from our presentation, highlighting the parallels between Aboriginal art and also a system to allow for the need for accessibility.

The foundation, for its part had attempted to create more commercially viable products, which took the embroidery away from the traditional clothes. These products; towels, table place-mats, napkins etc. were intended to target the tourist market within the area by giving products which did not require as much time and could therefore be created more quickly. The base material, such as the towels, would be bought in from the USA or Italy and then have an embroidered panel attached. So a solution was in play, but was it the right one? The cultural significance of the embroidery, the unique characteristics of each design, all hand made and highly personal, but applied to an imported mass manufactured towel that would be purchased as a cheap souvenir alongside an 'I♥YUCATAN'

T-shirt. Whilst this solution may drive volume it also devalues the cultural significance of the craft to both consumers and ultimately to the crafts-people involved. This strategy could easily have the opposite effect to that desired, which would be to reduce the craft to just another commodity item.

If we were to think of a current parallel where an ancient culture has managed to resolve the conflicts between maintaining cultural integrity and accurately communicating their values within the modern world, we in Australia need look no further than the Aboriginal artists who have championed their work as an intrinsic part of their heritage and the connection to the physical and spiritual environment that inspires them.



Part of this success comes from the greater awareness of Aboriginal culture and the significance of the symbolism in their art.

For us the Mani situation was very similar, in that the idea of value had to be maintained. The Mani had to value the work they did and recognise its unique qualities and the strength it gave to their community by reinforcing their identity. The inward looking market had to value the work as more than just an attractively embellished towel, they had to connect with the culture behind the work, and see the embroidery as more than just stitches in cloth. In the presentation we created for Banamex, we challenged them to re-think their current strategy and asked them to consider an alternative.

The Alternative Path

Our solution was lifted from the Mayan's culture. The mothers and grandmothers pass on the skills of embroidery to the daughters and also the verbal history of their culture so that they understand how to weave them into the work they will one day create themselves. Our suggestion was that this matriarchal system be the basis for a wider communal effort, where a 'work-

shop' uses these tiers of experience to create products that are also tiered, in both skill level, labour involved and cost of the end product. This artisan workshop would create products that ranged from fully machine stitched products and partially hand embellished, to fully hand created pieces, where the creations would be named and with a possible biography of the individual artisan. At the top end we recommended one-off pieces either from a body of work or specially commissioned. The channels to market would preferably be artisan craft shops or museum stores that could provide additional communication to consumers.

Our main focus was to create an environment and system that was natural for the artisans to work within. Additionally we would need to create an identity that could badge these works, to connect what could be quite disparate pieces, and also project the culture, quality and very human aspect of the work.

It was also our desire to bring in additional crafts-people from the community to support the offering, and also to strengthen

the community as a whole. For the packaging, we looked to use a very distinctive and traditional paper called Amaté. This paper, handmade from fig bark is unique and quite beautiful in its own right and could be made within the community. Woodcarving is also a local speciality as is the creation of twine from the 'Henequen' plant.

Each of these crafts can either support or become the primary product, allowing each article to reflect the distinct regional and cultural flavour in every element that makes up the bought article, whether it be packaging, tags or even the communication material. This potential development of the community to interact in this manner is nothing new as small communities have worked this way for generations.

The solution lay in simply adding a strategy that reflected the market, which in this case is you and me, curious outsiders who want to be informed, who want to feel connected beyond the product to the people who created it and beyond them to their history. ■

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IN THE KNOW**

