



Identity in doing

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«I make my identity known as the society is a gathering of identities» (Sami Naïr). It is in this wish of being social that identity as providing a meaning to community life makes sense. This showing of individual identity creates symbolic spaces where we recognise ourselves in supraindividual, in collective cultural identities. We shall agree that material culture (crafts, design, architecture, fashion, art) with its strong symbolic charge is the item articulating the identity of a country. Yet beyond its ability to create icons that may become economic drivers at different levels, it provides us identity in doing, deep knowledge of our constructive wisdom, trust in our ability to shape the present rather than repeating uselessly the forms of the past.



Identifying culture and identity seems obvious but it is not. Culture, as «learnt and shared patterns of conduct and thought being properties of a social group»,¹ relates to differential but also cohering factors. It is difference and identity at one time. It is like our appreciation of so-called urban tribes: a Gothic girl is a differentiation model but it is seeing her amidst the group that identity appears (they all look the same).

Sharing a culture makes us feel safe and provides clear patterns of conduct. Outside our environment, we feel unsafe but reassert ourselves by resorting to identity (difference) provided by our culture of origin: asking where we are from provides us foundations based on which we can tackle difference seeking similarities.

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From its origin, the human species has shown its difference, especially based on cultural product: the bifacial axe, the Venus of Willendorf. Evolved primates marked their territory with objects. In semiology, this is the culture of signs, the culture of use and the culture of change; they are own topics. The axe was a tool, it made life easier, it was a prosthesis where the body was limited (cut, scratch, hit). The Venus of Willendorf was an object of sign and also made life easier, but it was an ideological prosthesis that provided knowledge, setting up bridges between reality and mystery (reproduction, femininity, life). Both objects identify us as a human culture and differentiate us as well: we never would go back to the world of primates. Hence material culture (art, design, architecture, fashion, crafts) can be seen as a dichotomy: culture of doing vs. culture of representing.

«Identity is a system of belonging that is broken and rebuilt towards any individual and from the latter to the total. There are multiple identities

that make us belong to different groups of reference: economic, ethnic, racial and professional identity, among others. Every social, individual and collective subject has an identity resulting from self-consciousness, built in their interaction with the others in a system of social relations of which they are an expression, sharing, creating stories, modifying themselves and the others and thus in constant change and contradiction.»²

This is how nations created trades, techniques and procedures over history to provide solutions to specific problems. Crafts catered during centuries for the material needs arising from the relation of humans with the world. Until fairly recently, craft artefacts were the only interface between ourselves and the environment: we dressed, ate, slept and transported with crafts. This was an enormous and indispensable task in itself, but crafts also conveyed with each artefact a local story, an own tradition, a specific adaptation of common techniques. So the function of mechanical use came with a story strengthening our feeling of belonging to a place and a group, often supported by distinctive ornamentation, typical of a place and a time. This emotional, psychological function is quite relevant. We have seen how with flooding by seriate objects and multiplication of so-called non-places we have come to see a whole range of non-objects without personality, breaking the bonds between ourselves and our household artefacts. This needs to be reminded as since the advent of seriate manufacturing and mechanical industry, crafts have been relegated to decoration, to superfluous and banal ornamentation.

It is important to point out that doing (and not only representing) includes strong items of identity. What stereotypes sometimes refer to as national characters (leading to jokes more or less to the point and classical thoughts like those of E. Kant: «... the Italians and the French are those distinguished from the others by the feeling of beauty; Germans, Englishmen and Spaniards stand out most in what is sublime»³) includes methodological items, abilities to do,

which are true strengths in assessing identities. If «doing is thinking» (as R. Sennett appropriately states in *The Craftsman*⁴), in doing lie key items of our way of thinking, our idiosyncrasy.

This is why it is necessary to have an in-depth thought on our way of doing, the long history of our craft artefacts (and art, fashion, design and architecture), how each functional problem has been met by an original solution lasting over the years. Isn't there a strong identity in that? Perhaps it is an intangible identity, but we often recognise it and it creates a feeling of empathy towards those with whom we share this way of doing. Problems of cultural relationship often lie in different ways of doing. We ourselves have heard about the «Catalan way of doing business» with a degree of seriousness, a claim for compliance, economic pride (Spanish stereotype converts into lack of generosity), ability to innovate... This way of managing adds to how we build, how doing creates thought: there is no need to point out that this is this what makes Gaudí a very Catalan role model, and not his specific way of how he does it.

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It becomes thus necessary to think about our way of doing from a holistic, anthropological and historical perspective. In this respect, it is strange that the idea of creating a museum on Catalan design (the future Disseny Hub Barcelona)⁵ ignores the development of doing represented by the different collections and pieces of research on rural crafts (e.g. the great work by Violant i Simorra)⁶ as we miss recognition of our ways of doing and thinking supporting modern times (unless we think of modern times as a Freudian breakdown, as «killing the father»).

Footprints of Catalonia

«Crafts trademark identifying craft products from Catalonia, which by means of identity and modernity convey the values of the country through items related with art, culture, history, tradition, architecture, landscape and our own folk customs.» This is the description Artesania Catalunya makes in introducing its new project to redefine the concept of tourist object. Based on a list of Catalan icons, the craft companies created a wide range of objects defined in the promotional leaflet as *crafts with identity*.

This is an action in which the economy of identity wishes to show its positive side. On the one hand, the effort has been done (through MNAC, IEC and FAD) to revisit the identity landmarks by establishing twenty-eight families: historical ages, traditions, urban landscape, *Nova Cançó*, food, literature, nature, folk tools, etc. This list has served to state our strengths and weaknesses and avoid stereotypes we do not want to be identified with. All this material also releases formal and functional creativity of the different craft disciplines: textile, jewellery, pottery, basketry, pillow lacework, leather, etc. Designers and craftspeople work in there, leading to a high degree of quality and more importantly an identifiable range of good products.

A sales point was opened at Artesania Catalunya in July 2010, which shall stimulate commercial action throughout Catalonia.

It intends to overcome the tourist-resident dichotomy: our potential customers shall be our residents, finding in these artefacts a quality offer meeting their wish of feeling represented in everyday objects, presents and celebrations. And this object highly appreciated by residents shall also be so by intelligent and cultivated tourists who wish to take home a true and shared experience, not a devaluated customary object.

All cultural communities, more or less heterogeneous groups but having common bonds, created signs of identity along their history. Catalonia is no exception; on the contrary, perhaps because its history has not been easy, identity icons have often been a cultural and emotional landmark but also had a political background. However, these icons are for

internal consumption; we appreciate, love and claim them. When external observers (i.e. tourists) come in, many decay into mere rhetoric as about every country and nation has something similar.

Economy of identity, local, impossible to relocate, fully committed to history but understood in a more anthropological sense.

«Identity is also a system of symbols and values allowing to tackle different daily situations. It acts as a filter allowing to decode, to *understand in order to work later*.»⁷

The idea of «brand» often includes these signs of identity but its use (basically to compete in a global market of country or city brands) reduces the complexity of a place (country, city, natural environment, village or architectonic site) to icons easy to identify. Stereotypes are brands, surprises are not. Thus we often find that identifiers only impoverish the interpretation and the picture a place has for foreigners and even locals by repeating them over and over again.

«The form and way of perceiving human groups through senses changes together with their very existence within big historical timeframes. These forms and ways in which this perception is organised and the medium where it occurs are shaped not only naturally but also historically.»⁸

The exchange of stereotypes is very interesting: the arts secondary school course at **Escola Massana** took part in a very enriching European project in early 2000. Together with two similar institutions from Turin and Grenoble it organised a school project with students. They were asked to complete a list of elements by which they considered their city was characterised in other cities: pizza, snow, Sagrada Família, etc. At the same time, they made a collage with the vision they had in Barcelona of people in Grenoble and Turin. These collages in A4 went

to the addressee city and were looked over, corrected, criticised and completed by local students (e.g. trying to avoid excessive reference to flamenco in Barcelona). All these corrections were returned to the authors, and with that material they created a postcard collection that became part of an itinerant exhibition visiting the three cities titled *Stereotypes*. Beyond the school character of this trans-European project, the complexity of the other, their signs of identity and often the difficulty in assimilating them came up.

Here we find a contradictory mechanism: we first see with a degree of perplexity how a sign of identity (e.g. the **Agbar tower**) appears; we later share with joy and pride its strength and the satisfaction of feeling represented collectively, and finally we struggle with the media and tourist burden and redundancy of that sign. Not having the own cultural identity recognised may be hard, but excessive success in a world of media can make local conviviality enormously difficult: urban groups often prefer global items of identity as a reaction to the dazzle caused by those from their own culture.

We can help dignify items of identity and applications of icons, but can we create them?

We still need to know why some of these stories have been successful and others not. Why for instance is pizza a globally known icon while Catalan *coca de recapte* is strictly local? Why have Mexican hats, now in clear disuse, survived as a Barcelona souvenir without any real relation with the place? Why did the Catalan donkey take grip and not the shepherd dog, the Montseny triton or the El Prat blue-legged rooster? Why is New York known as the Big Apple to everybody when it is only one part of the city? Why went expressions like «Fire Rose» or «City of Domes» lost to call Barcelona while others survived? What does the Big Ben have St Paul's Cathedral does not? What makes **Moulin Rouge** better known than other similar theatres in Pigalle? If we interpret identity as a cultural construction we could make the mistake of believing that we

can create a symbol out of nothing, that we can design, in the derogative sense media usually understand this concept, the icons representing us. Hence a good marketing strategy and a good product would do.

Fortunately, life of cities and countries is much more complex and ready-made mechanisms are not always successful. Perhaps it is more a process of following an already consolidated object, a symbol, an icon, etc. towards good materialisation of the object. A hotbed is needed to have icons work and residents need to be able to take hold of them without feeling ashamed.

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Another strategy is making a show of anything, as **Guy Debord** claimed: «The whole life of societies where modern production conditions predominate appears as an enormous accumulation of shows.»⁹ Hosting events may us make believe that identity building largely depends on the echo this endless staging has in media. But again, mechanisms in building the collective imagery often go beyond either institutional or commercial fiction.

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What remains unchangeable is that these identity symbols change and evolve. «Identity is a felt need for roots and belonging, participation and self-realisation, expressed in the forms of human action they fill with sense and continuity, which does not involve rigidity but evolution, change and development as an expression

Valorising instead of commercialising artificiality

Design is usually understood as an added value and is often believed to confer the final shape, the wrap, the shell of the object. Although it is true that it is part of the value chain of a product, its main function is not added on top of it but inseparable. Detecting new markets, new needs, new uses is done before entering the actual design process, yet it is also part of it.

Having said that, regarding identity items and souvenirs, design can be a good ally to valorise anything existing, taking up traditions and improving their market visualisation. However, we must not believe that it is about turning authenticity into a souvenir to make it accessible to tourists but some products already having quality need to be dignified, if possible keeping their value for use.

To give an example, valorising the Sant Antoni second-hand book market does not mean that booksellers sell book-shaped fridge magnets but making it attractive to visitors with information and signposting while keeping the character, just like we like to visit the riverside stalls in Paris or the **Mauerpark** market in Berlin.

With the Rambla bird stalls Barcelona missed an opportunity of valorising instead of commercialising artificiality recently. Accepting that they had to be dismantled for the sake of the animals shown, a good strategy would have been to create a spot of interest for locals that would eventually become one for visitors, rather than going directly for tourists excluding residents, who now have a reason less to stroll along the Rambla.

The presence of our fashion designers, jewellers, craftspeople, etc. needs to be facilitated at tourist sites even if their product is not specifically designed for tourists. In the long term it is equally or even more profitable and strengthens the identity of the place without slipping into fictitious representations.

of contradictions that are overcome.»¹⁰ However, in this evolution the very dynamics of the place, the capacity of its citizens to create new images, buildings and reference works matters more than economic, political or commercial aspirations to create new symbols. Today's emerging art will become tomorrow's classic; innovative architecture the souvenir of the future; collective feeling the slogan of the next generation, and not the other way around.

It seems logical that to be able to create new symbols, new facts need to be generated. It seems logical but is not so commonplace. The departments in charge of tourism strategies like to use items from the past, while current creation, urban planning and protection of natural areas are not understood as an investment into future identity icons. For instance, Vallès or Camp de Tarragona could be as well-known as Tuscany but lack of protection massacred them as a territory and now nobody feels identified with this landscape packed with industrial areas and urban sprawl. Passeig de Gràcia and Portal de l'Àngel in Barcelona are about to give up their identity due to accumulation of franchises. But the same can also be said of the main streets in many towns.

Creating the conditions so the local finds a visualisation space in the global market, thus representing the arrival of a big tourist stream, is an identity-building strategy based on a hotbed, not created on a fictitious basis. Antwerp for instance keeps a high rate of centrally located stores for local fashion designers.

We will agree that identity should be treated as a dynamic and prospective attitude rather than an exhaustive look into the past to items already full of meaning and settled in the collective subconscious. Everything is contemporary and attitude needs to feel identified in doing, in a way of understanding wisdom in hand and reason, in trust in our ability to shape the present: here lies the strongest identity. However, this present cannot be done without fundamental recognition of our tradition, of grateful responsibility towards our cultural memory.

This cultural memory is not only that of shapes, the repertoire of icons or gestures (so prone to be given a meaning ex post facto out of an ideological and sometimes even historically illiterate interest: ask the Osborne bull for that) but also the memory of material culture, know-how, technologies, growth of the medium (pharmatech Switzerland still comes back on its herbalist tradition). An example is Àssua valley wool. There were sheep the wool of which was not used, and a young designer who settled in the area learnt about the use, crafts, times and problems.

Together with local craftspeople he started to propose new objects thanks to his knowledge of trends and the market as well as his project capacity. This is how new textile ideas, new wool applications in the area of sustainable building came up. This is a model practice bringing together modernity and tradition, in which the latter provides its weight as identity culture and respect for the environment, an indispensable condition for our symbolic and real construction.

This example is part of one of the most outstanding programmes we have in Catalonia: *Oficis Singulars* (Singular Trades),¹¹ an initiative by Artesania Catalunya started with vision and enthusiasm by Gemma Amat, who created a council of experts analysing the territory, pointing out rooted but threatened trades and materials and diagnosing and proposing an action led by a team of young designers together with local stakeholders and municipalities.

In this and many other cases, identity lies in the material used and the technique by which it is manufactured and not the final product, which is a mere consequence of the time and needs detected. It is important to point this out as identity has too often been related with objects, pieces and products directly conveyed to the souvenir category, though often miniaturised, thus losing their original function.

We need to understand that processes, manners and characters also make an identity. A black

pottery jug from Verdú is as iconic as a bowl made of this material able to be used in the microwave oven.

«A distinctive old city like Barcelona becomes sometimes generic in oversimplifying its identity. It becomes transparent like a logo. The opposite never occurs... not yet at least [...]. Here tourists join in herds around a bunch of places. Hordes of triumphing vultures try to sell them the city's "unique" items. The unique parts of all Generic Cities put together created a universal souvenir, a scientific crossing of Eiffel Tower, Sacré Coeur and Statue of Liberty: a tall building (usually between 200 and 300 metres) drowned in a small water ball with snow or, if close to the Equator, golden snow flakes; diaries with high-relief leather covers; hippie sandals, although true hippies are quickly expelled.»¹²

The Catalan Tourism Agency is working on a list of country icons based on the work done by a taskforce with representatives from the National Art Museum of Catalonia (MNAC), the Institute of Catalan Studies (IEC) and Foment de les Arts i el Disseny (FAD). The provisional list includes objects (e.g. the *porró*) and buildings (Seu Vella in Lleida) as well as natural (e.g. Cadí) and man-made landscapes (e.g. dry stone walls with carob and olive trees in Camp de Tarragona).

However, intangibles like association work, strolling (commonplace in many seaside towns) or what French call *la joie de vivre* have also been introduced. Hence shaping identity goes beyond gathering material icons and also means significantly to update typical techniques, processes and abilities of a territory, time, climate or group, that is, a culture. Baskets for picking mushrooms cannot be understood without



▲ *Oficis Singulares* (Singular Trades), an initiative by Artesania Catalunya, created a council of experts analysing the territory, pointing out rooted but threatened trades and materials and diagnosing and proposing actions by a team of young designers.

Catalan passion for mushrooms. But if anybody proposed for instance a basket to recycle building debris sacks, would that make sense? And if anybody used the mushroom-picking basket technique to make a bike rack, would this have any meaning for identity?

Economy of identity, local, impossible to relocate, fully committed to history but understood in a more anthropological sense: «When the chieftain of a nomad tribe was asked what he was carrying, he answered that the first he was carrying was himself. We also observed that in his bags he carried objects full of history, recipes, lottery tickets, business cards as well as some sweets and teabags.»¹³

Everything is contemporary and attitude needs to feel identified in doing, in a way of understanding wisdom in hand and reason, in trust in our ability to shape the present: here lies the strongest identity.

We are living in times in which personal mobility and proliferation of non-places make us a sort of permanent nomads. Like Jacques Tati brilliantly showed in *Playtime*:¹⁴ airports, offices, shopping centres and franchises have most Western cities look like a victory of global mainstream. Far from helping us to be located, this situation creates anguish, anguish of constant flying. This is why we need tools allowing us to land and especially to take root.

Identity symbols are a good tool to this end. Their ability of getting in touch with local reality, the material, the craftsman's hand, the architecture based on vernacular techniques, design updating the use of own materials and techniques, imperfections making non-seriate objects singular, digital technologies at the service of ultralocal production, etc. can help us get again in touch with the earth beneath our feet.

This is an identity that despite yielding iconic results is built on doing, on recognising ourselves in our own idiosyncrasy as a nation seeking pleasure in things well done. Or at least this is the way we want to see it.

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