

Université de Montréal

Culture as a project:  
design, self-determination and identity assertion  
in indigenous communities

par  
Renata Marques Leitão

Faculté de l'aménagement

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Université de Montréal  
Faculté des études supérieures

Cette thèse:

*Culture as a project: design, self-determination  
and identity assertion in indigenous communities*

présentée par :  
Renata Marques Leitão

a été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes :

Pierre De Coninck  
Président-rapporteur

Laurent Jérôme  
Membre du Jury

Elizabeth Tunstall  
Examineur externe

Anne Marchand  
Directeure de recherche



## ABSTRACT

The ultimate goal of this study was to create a better understanding of how design practice might play a part in addressing complex social problems within indigenous communities. This study was conceived as a Participatory Action Research project, and realized in collaboration with members of the Atikamekw Nation, one of Quebec's First Nations. As a collaborative project, it addressed issues that were considered as very significant by Atikamekw artisans, artists and cultural stewards. The main goal of the collaborative project was the development of an approach of design workshops that could enhance the Atikamekw artisans' creativity, their capacity to represent themselves, and at the same time, increase their appreciation of their own cultural heritage.

This study had two levels: (1) In a context-specific and practical level, it aimed to conceive an approach to design workshops that could tackle the issues identified by the Atikamekw partners. (2) In a theoretical and wide-applicable level, it aimed to develop a better understanding of the roles a social designer can play in long-term community projects and to develop a conceptual framework that could inform social designers who want to work with indigenous communities – by articulating concepts from social science with key notions of design studies.

This conceptual framework was articulated around two main concepts: empowerment and identity assertion. I adopted the definition of empowerment proposed by Naila Kabber (2001): empowerment is the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. I argue that strategic life choices are linked to a project. Since being trained as a designer entails learning how to think and act by projects, nurturing people's inherent capacity to design might encourage their empowerment. Regarding identity assertion, I argue that graphic design practice refers to an essential human power: the power to create representation in order to assert who you are and to influence how you are perceived by others. In this sense, a graphic design intervention might be about increasing the power of self-representation of 'invisible' groups, enabling them to project and convey a recognizable identity, particularly through the use of

visual symbols.

Therefore, at the heart of this dissertation is the notion that the capacity to conceive and realize projects is a fundamental lever of self-determined change. This capacity is particularly important to indigenous peoples who are striving to redefine their place in the world and to forge a better life while dealing with the legacy of colonialism and the consequences of postcolonial policies.

I suggest that culture should be regarded not only as a heritage to be preserved and transmitted but mainly as a project of a good life for those societies. By project, I mean that culture, as a life pattern, is the matrix for future development. Ultimately, I suggest that the main role of a social designer in long-term collaborations with members of indigenous communities is to support the capacity of local populations to create projects that are aligned with their cultural matrix, in pursuit of the good life as that culture defines it.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Social design, indigenous cultures, social innovation, empowerment, self-representation, participatory action research, Atikamekw Nation, iconography, visual symbols, self-determination, graphic design

## RÉSUMÉ

Le principal objectif de cette étude est d'offrir une meilleure compréhension de la façon dont la pratique du design peut contribuer à répondre à des problèmes complexes au sein des communautés autochtones. Cette recherche-action participative a été réalisée en collaboration avec des membres de la Nation Atikamekw, une des dix Premières Nations du Québec. Ce projet collaboratif visait à adresser des enjeux considérés comme fondamentaux par des artistes, artisans et passeurs culturels atikamekw. L'objectif concret du projet a été la conception d'une démarche d'ateliers de design qui favorise le développement de la créativité et de la capacité d'autoreprésentation des artisans atikamekw, ainsi que la valorisation de leur patrimoine culturel. Pour ce faire, plusieurs ateliers collaboratifs de création ont été réalisés pendant 3 années consécutives (2013-2015).

Cette étude s'est articulée autour deux aspects: (1) Au niveau pratique et spécifique au contexte atikamekw, cette recherche visait la conception d'une approche d'ateliers en design où les participants s'inspirent de l'iconographie traditionnelle de leur culture afin de concevoir des produits contemporains dans lesquels ils se reconnaissent. (2) Au niveau théorique et généralisable, l'étude visait à avoir une compréhension plus approfondie du rôle qu'un designer social peut jouer dans des projets communautaires à long terme et à développer un cadre conceptuel qui pourra informer les designers sociaux souhaitant travailler au sein de communautés autochtones.

Ce cadre conceptuel a été développé à travers l'arrimage des concepts des sciences sociales avec des notions clés de la discipline du design. L'arrimage a été organisé autour de deux notions principales: l'empowerment et l'affirmation de l'identité. Cette étude a adopté la définition de l'empowerment proposée par Naila Kabeer (2001): empowerment se réfère à l'expansion de la capacité à exercer des choix stratégiques dans un contexte où cette capacité a été niée. Je suggère que les choix stratégiques sont liés à des projets (projets de vie, projets communautaires, projets d'identité, etc.). Dans la mesure où le design concerne l'habilité à penser et agir au travers des projets, la pratique du design est un moyen de faciliter l'empowerment

des individus. Par rapport à l'affirmation de l'identité, je suggère que la pratique du design graphique concerne un pouvoir humain fondamental : le pouvoir de créer des représentations afin d'affirmer qui l'on est et d'influencer comment l'on est perçu par les autres. En effet, l'objectif d'une intervention en design graphique serait d'accroître le pouvoir d'autoreprésentation de groupes de personnes "invisibles", en leur permettant ainsi de concevoir et communiquer une identité reconnaissable, particulièrement à travers l'utilisation de symboles visuels.

En résumé, la capacité à concevoir et réaliser des projets, en apportant des changements intentionnels à sa propre situation, est un vecteur fondamental de l'autodétermination. Cette capacité est particulièrement importante pour des peuples autochtones qui vivent aujourd'hui avec un lourd héritage de la perturbation de leur société par des politiques coloniales d'assimilation. De nombreux peuples autochtones sont en train de lutter pour redéfinir leur place dans le monde contemporain et améliorer leurs conditions de vie. Par ailleurs, je propose que la culture soit envisagée comme un projet de vie souhaitable, telle que définie par chaque société. Ultimement, je suggère que, dans le cadre d'une collaboration de longue durée auprès d'une communauté autochtone, le rôle principal d'un designer social est de soutenir la capacité de la population locale à concevoir des projets alignés avec les valeurs de leur culture, dans la perspective de créer une vie souhaitable, tel que définie dans leur cadre culturel spécifique.

## **MOTS CLÉS**

Design social, cultures autochtones, innovation sociale, empowerment, autoreprésentation, recherche-action participative, Nation Atikamekw, iconographie, symboles visuels, autodétermination, design graphique



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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CNA - Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw

PAR – participatory action research

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# 1

## **Introduction & Strategy of inquiry**



# **CHAPTER I**

## **Introduction**

*We are under no illusion that design is everything in human life, nor do we foolishly believe that individuals who specialize in one or another area of design are necessarily capable of carrying out successful work in other areas. What we do believe is that design offers a way of thinking about the world that is significant for addressing many of the problems that human beings face in contemporary culture. (Buchanan 2001b: 38)*

This study explores the means to bring about a desired change, that is, the intentional change that seeks to transform an unsatisfactory situation into a desired one. This kind of change is the very essence of design, as a human activity (Schön 1983; Simon 1969). Design can be understood as the human ability to purposefully imagine and bring to existence a desired thing or situation, as well as the discipline that studies this ability (Margolin 2010; Nelson & Stolterman 2012).

The change that is at the core of this study is about transforming the distressing living conditions of indigenous communities who suffered assimilation. I understand that by talking collectively about “indigenous peoples and communities”, I am talking about numerous distinct populations, who live in different contexts, with distinct cultures and experiences. In spite of the vast differences, there are key similarities between indigenous peoples: they share the legacy of colonization and the struggle for self-determination.

They share experiences as peoples who have been subjected to the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty, by a colonizing society that has come to dominate and determine the shape and quality of their lives, even after it has formally pulled out. (Smith 1999: 7).

Before European colonization, indigenous peoples lived in a world of their making. Assimilation has drastically transformed the material life of numerous indigenous communities, with a harmful impact on their well-being (Guindon 2015). The consequences of these transformations can be described in terms such as poverty, dependency, and distress (Kirmayer, Tait & Simpson 2009; United Nations 2009).

This situation calls for change, but we need to be extremely careful about how we want to bring about changes. A great deal of postcolonial assimilatory policies – such as sedentarization and the residential school system – was conceived by the wish to change indigenous peoples. Many development interventions have been conceived in order to change (or ‘develop’) poor local populations. Ill-conceived development interventions can be found in numerous countries, with regrettable consequences (Fry 2009; Sahlins 1999; Sen 1999). UNESCO argues that very often the ideology of development has tended to impair “the capacity of local cultures to contribute to the well-being of their communities” (2009: 192). In other words, those attempts to change indigenous communities have deepened their disempowerment and dependency on external resources (Douglas 2004; Guindon 2015). Therefore, this study refers to another kind of change, one that is based on self-determination. Self-determination can be understood as the right of indigenous people to conceive development in their own way and to pursue their own visions for the future of their communities (Salazar 2009). The issue here is how to bring about self-determined change in order to improve the living conditions of indigenous communities.

In this study, I argue that the capacity to create and realize projects is a fundamental lever of self-determined change. Since design practice entails learning how to think and act by projects, nurturing people’s inherent capacity to design might contribute to enhance the capacity of indigenous people to engage in forward-looking behavior. Accordingly, the role of social designers would be mainly to support – with their knowledge and skills – the capacity of stakeholders to define and act upon their own projects.

### **On design practice**

Practice is defined by Tony Fry as “the application of knowledge and skill to realize some kind of end” (2009: 19). He explains that the proficient exercise of any practice actually depends on it becoming part of the being of the person who employs it. To acquire a practice takes time and compliancy – “training, repetition, reflection and correction all act to move what is initially an alien activity into the ontological realm of the taken-for-granted” (idem). For Fry, design practice is not the application of a methodology and is not the same as the design process. Acquiring design practice means a change in the being of the practitioner, in which the activity of design becomes embodied in the individual.

What do we mean with design activity? “To come up with an idea of what we think would be an ideal addition to the world, and to give real existence –form, structure, and shape – to that idea, is at the core of design as a human activity”(Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 1). In this study, design workshops are places where participants can develop design practice – by following a training in design methods and skills and exercising the design activity.

### **Strategy of inquiry**

Another issue, in this thesis, is how to study an intentional process of social change. I argue (in chapter II) that we should use together Participatory Action Research (PAR) and design inquiry. Both approaches develop knowing through action with the goal of bringing about positive changes in the real world, and both approaches try to understand not only how the world is, but mainly how the world could be.

This study was conceived as a Participatory Action Research project, and realized in collaboration with members of the Atikamekw Nehirowisiw Nation. The Atikamekw Nehirowisiw Nation is one of Quebec’s First Nations, whose ancestral territory is located in central Quebec, in the St-Maurice river valley and its surroundings (Gelinat 2000, 2002; Jérôme & Veilleux 2014; Société d’histoire atikamekw 2014).

As a collaborative project, it addressed issues that were considered as very significant by Atikamekw artisans, artists and cultural stewards. Those issues were related to the challenges of revitalizing craft traditions, enhancing the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage and producing crafts as a source of socio-economic development. The main goal of the collaborative project was the development of an approach of design workshops that could enhance the Atikamekw artisans’ creativity, their capacity to represent themselves, and at the same time, increase their appreciation of their own cultural heritage. This project has been named Tapiskwan, after the Atikamekw name of the Saint-Maurice river.

This study had two levels:

- 1. To conceive an approach to design workshops that could tackle the issues identified by the Atikamekw partners.**
- 2. To understand how design interventions could contribute to address complex social problems within indigenous communities.**

On one hand, this paper tells the story of a collaborative development of an approach to design workshops to create contemporary products based on Atikamekw traditional iconography. On the other, it presents the knowledge that was mobilized, articulated and produced in order to develop this approach and as a consequence of the actions in the field. In this sense, the actions in the Atikamekw context became a source of reflection about the potential roles of designers in tackling complex social problems.

	<b>LEVEL 1</b> <b>Context-based and practical</b>	<b>LEVEL 2</b> <b>Theoretical</b>
Research approach	Participatory action research	Litterature review and reflection in action
Objectives	1) To conceive an approach to design workshops that could tackle the issues identified by the Atikamekw partners.  2) To develop an approach of collaboration between designers and indigenous stakeholders that aims at social innovation and long-term empowerment.	1) To understand how design interventions could contribute to address complex social problems within indigenous communities.  2) To articulate concepts of social sciences and key notions from design studies, therefore conceiving a conceptual framework that could inform social designers who desire to intervene in indigenous communities.

**TABLE 1:** The two levels of this study

## **1. PAR IN ATIKAMEKW CONTEXT: THE TAPISKWAN PROJECT**

Each article presented in this dissertation tells a facet of the story of the Tapiskwan project. In the introduction, I take the opportunity of telling that story from a personal and autobiographical perspective. I am a Brazilian designer. These two words capture many features that are central to my identity and to my choices – and consequently, central to the choices I made in my doctoral research.

The origin of this PAR project was the partnership established, in 2011, between the *Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw* (CNA - Atikamekw Nation Council) and the community-university research alliance *Design & Culture Matérielle* [DCM] of



Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and Université de Montréal<sup>1</sup>. The design team of Université de Montréal – directed by prof. Anne Marchand – started to collaborate with the CNA – and its cultural representative Christian Coocoo – as a branch of this larger research alliance. From the start, the design team joined Dr. Marchand, Cedric Sportes (product designer) and me (research assistant<sup>2</sup> and graphic designer).

The collaboration between CNA and Université de Montréal focused on developing new training strategies to enhance Atikamekw artisans' capacity to innovate – and so, most of the activities has consisted in giving design workshops to Atikamekw artisans and youth. We aimed to address the challenge of producing Atikamekw crafts as a source a socioeconomic development and, at the same time, revitalizing cultural practices. At the beginning, none of us understood the complexity of this challenge.

The challenge involves the relationship between Atikamekw and material life. Atikamekw were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers (Gelinas 2000; Poirier 2004). They suffered drastic transformations in their material circumstances in the last century because of changes in the territory, sedentarization in reserves, and several assimilation policies (Gelinas 2002; Jerome 2010; Poirier 2004, 2010). These transformations made them increasingly dependent on governmental aid and money transfers (Awashish 2013). Presently, they live in an environment – the three reserves – in which they cannot practice their traditional ways of life anymore, but it is not adapted to contemporary life either – as unemployment and habitation problems are prevalent.

The ethnonym that Atikamekw<sup>3</sup> use to refer to themselves is “Nehirowisiw”.

Le terme *Nehirowisiw* est englobant. Pour les chasseurs que nous sommes, il exprime la fusion avec notre milieu de vie (notcimik), le rapport spirituel avec le gibier, la capacité de survie en situation d'isolement, durant l'hiver par exemple, ou sur une très longue période de temps. (Société d'histoire atikamekw 2014: 85)

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1. The research group DCM was established in 1992 with the goal of devising individual and community development approaches for minority populations. The objectives of DCM's study involves fostering individual creative development and increasing the appreciation of First Peoples' cultures among both native and non-native peoples (Kaine, De Coninck and Bellemare 2010; Kaine and Dubuc 2010). The key element of DCM's approach is understanding the creative process as a means of empowerment (Kaine, De Coninck and Bellemare 2010).

2. At the beginning, as a master's student and, from September 2011 on, as a PhD student.

3. The ethnonym 'Atikamekw' was adopted in the 1970s in their relationship with anthropologists (Poirier et al. 2014)

“Nehirowisiw” means a being in balance with his or her environment, with his or her surroundings (Ottawa 2014). In the seminomadic way of life, crafting objects was an essential element of the adaptation into their land and the survival in their climate conditions. Today, within the reserves, producing crafts is not crucial to their livelihood anymore. Atikamekw use pick-up trucks and buy food in the grocery store, therefore, manufacturing objects has become either a means to reconnect with their cultural past, or the production of decorative handicrafts. Nevertheless, many Atikamekw are still active in crafting objects (Awashish 2013). At issue here is how to harness Atikamekw craftsmanship in order to generate a new balance with their environment in the three communities.

### 1.1. Initial problems

In 2011, our Atikamekw partners initially identified two main problems affecting Atikamekw craftspeople: (1) loss of cultural identity and (2) scarce supply of birch bark and moose skin – the two most important raw materials of Atikamekw craft. It is important to note that these two problems are inextricable, since the natural resources of the territory are central to their cultural identity.

The first cycle of design workshops<sup>4</sup> (in 2011), and the follow-up activities (in 2012), aimed at finding alternatives to traditional materials based on the resources available on the territory. However, the idea of making use of new materials did not find resonance with Atikamekw artisans at that moment.

The long-term involvement in the community and several collaborative actions allowed us to identify new facets of the challenge of producing crafts in Atikamekw communities, to understand some hindrances, and to identify new opportunities. In Chapter III, I present how the problems, challenges and opportunities identified through our joint actions have given rise to Tapiskwan project.

In trying to address the issues that came to surface and were articulated as a consequence of our actions, I devised a proposition: *what if we dissociate the material and the symbolic aspects of Atikamekw craft, and changed our focus from finding alternatives to scarce materials to using traditional iconography?*

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4. The goals, methodology and outcomes of this cycle of workshops have already been examined in two papers (Marchand & Leitao 2012; 2014).



**IMAGE 1:** Birch bark baskets. Source: McCord Museum.



**IMAGE 2:** Birch bark baskets. Source: Musée de la civilisation à Québec



**IMAGE 3:** Birch bark baskets. Source: Serge Jauvin collection / Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw.



**IMAGE 4:** Moose hide moccasins. Source: Musée de la civilisation à Québec



**IMAGE 5:** Birch bark objects. Source: Musée de la civilisation à Québec



**IMAGE 6:** Moose hide moccasins. Source: Musée de la civilisation à Québec



**IMAGE 7:** Moose hide moccasins. Source: Serge Jauvin collection / Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw.

## 1.2. Atikamekw iconography

From the moment I started working with the Atikamekws, I was charmed by the beauty of their traditional iconography. Atikamekws have a tradition of engraving birch bark, which can be observed on their magnificent baskets and canoes. Their objects had a distinctive visual language that involved a style of representation, a system of symbols, and some principles of composition. As a graphic designer, I thought their graphic tradition was absolutely beautiful and minimalist.

Even if I am a graphic designer, I had reservations about using Atikamekw iconography in the design workshops. There are several approaches of design interventions using local iconography to revitalize traditional crafts, and most do not allow for the empowerment and creative development of local craftspeople (Borges 2011; Thomas 2006). The strategy of outsiders coming to a community and making an inventory of symbols and icons for the use of local artisans – therefore attributing a visual ‘identity’ to the community – has been very criticized (Borges 2011; Lima 2010). As Borges argues, “something an ‘outsider’ considers as identity may not be felt or lived in the same way by an ‘insider’”(2011: 143).

Nevertheless, in two years (2011-2013) talking frequently with Atikamekw artisans and with the cultural representative of CNA, Christian Coocoo, I heard numerous stories involving the symbols and the graphic elements present on traditional crafts. Symbols engraved on traditional crafts have been used across generations to convey stories and the identity of the family, and sometimes of the artisans, who made the object. I came to understand that their system of symbols was something very meaningful (see Chapter VI).

**Atikamekw iconography – the symbols and ornaments of traditional crafts – constitute a rich cultural heritage by itself.** The symbols of traditional crafts (and their meanings) could be documented, transposed to diverse media, and used to create new images and products that embody Atikamekw cultural identity. Working with their symbols was not to a matter of reproducing hollow motifs, but of revitalizing a symbolic and communicative heritage.

In focusing on traditional iconography, we could work on many fronts: (a) The documentation of the traditional symbols could contribute to the preservation of this cultural heritage. (b) Graphic design workshops might provide young Atikamekw with a professional perspective as visual artists. (c) Using their symbols consistently

could create a 'brand' for the Atikamekw Nation. In other words, to purposefully use their symbols may contribute to make the Atikamekw cultural identity known by non-indigenous publics. (d) The use of traditional symbols for the creation of new products might increase the appreciation of this cultural heritage by the Atikamekw themselves, reinforcing their sense of identification with their symbols.

This idea was discussed with Mr. Coocoo, in April 2013, who embraced it wholeheartedly. He considered the revitalization of the system of symbols as something of fundamental importance to preserve Atikamekw cultural identity (what is discussed in chapter VI). The proposition of working with the traditional symbols in the workshops was also discussed with Jacques Newashish, the most renowned Atikamekw artist. Their knowledge, ideas, desires and visions for the future of Atikamekw community were fundamental to give structure to this project.

**The practical goal of this study was to conceive an approach of design workshops that could:**

**(1) revitalize and increase the appreciation of Atikamekw iconographic heritage** – enabling Atikamekws to recognize that the visual symbols of their culture are precious resources for their self-representation;

**(2) introduce the participants to design skills (particularly to the ones related to product design and visual communication) and printing techniques** – enabling participants to develop their creativity and their competences in terms of visual expression;

**(3) enhance the participants' capacity to conceive and realize projects and to represent themselves.**

The Tapiskwan approach was inspired by Paulo Freire's (2005, 1996) emancipatory approach for adult literacy – which is described in Chapter V. In a practical level, it received a fundamental contribution from Cedric Sportes, a product designer and experienced design instructor, who established the (intense) rhythm of the activities, created some activities, and was responsible for pushing the participants out of their comfort zones. In the workshops, as I explain in Chapter V, we believe that the activities and projects have to be challenging in order to enhance the participants' self-confidence and motivation, making them realize their talents and abilities. In other words, since so often members of indigenous communities are

treated as inept by institutions and mainstream Canadian population, we challenge them to discover how capable they can be.

We developed the Tapiskwan approach from 2013 to 2015. In each summer (2013-2014-2015), we gave one or two weeks of design workshops to Atikamekw youth and adult artisans. Its guiding principles and activities are described in Chapters V and VI.

### **1.3. Ethical agreement**

In October 2013, I presented my project to a group of councilors of the Council of the Atikamekw Nation, who would judge the significance of the project for Atikamekw communities, my motivations and the quality of my relationships with the Atikamekw.

The councilors appreciated my proposition and found it very significant. However, they asked me something: it should not be a study about Atikamekw iconography or about the Atikamekw who take part in the study. As Mr. Coocoo suggested, I should consider this project as a pilot-study that would generate knowledge and an approach of workshops that could be useful to other indigenous communities. In other words, I would not tell their story – as so many researchers who work within indigenous communities do –, I would tell my story of a social designer who develops knowledge in partnership with member of the Atikamekw Nation.

This is a deep ethical agreement that recognizes the relationship between the partners as equal –and not unilateral. The researcher is not only the intervenor whose knowledge serves the indigenous community, but someone who is changed by the knowledge of local stakeholders.

Several Atikamekws have been my partners in the process of understanding how design activity might play a part in addressing complex social problems within indigenous communities and creating the conditions for their flourishing. For sure, my knowledge and understanding have been completely transformed throughout these five years of commitment. I came to gain a better understanding about the roles a social designer can play in interventions and in long-term community projects that aim at social innovation. I identified some basic notions from social sciences that are fundamental to a social designer who wants to work in indigenous or multi-

cultural contexts. And mainly, I reflected about the motivations for designers to work in indigenous contexts and to tackle complex social projects. *Why are we doing this?*

The following dissertation has to be read from this standpoint. It is a reflexive study made from a design practitioner. In this sense, it was inspired by the epistemology of practice formulated by the pragmatist philosopher Donald Schön (1983) – discussed in Chapter II.

## 2. WHY DESIGN INQUIRY IN INDIGENOUS CONTEXTS?

Design, as an academic discipline, does not have a tradition of research in indigenous cultures – there is a very reduced literature about design in indigenous and other non-modern<sup>5</sup> contexts. Why should we produce design research in indigenous contexts? The answer has two aspects: what indigenous communities could gain in collaborating with design practitioners and what design researchers – and ultimately the design discipline – could gain in collaborating with indigenous peoples. This dissertation describes in chapters IV, V and VI some potential benefits of design practice to indigenous communities. In this section and in chapter VII, I will discuss potential benefits to design discipline.

I believe that design research in indigenous contexts may improve our understanding of design activity and its articulation with the concept of culture, as suggested by Victor Margolin:

Rather than considering design to be a product of industrialization, we need to think more broadly about the conception and planning of material and visual culture. This enables us to find design in all cultures while at the same time comparing the different conceptions of design and the ways of organizing design practice. (2005:239)

Not only it could allow us to enlarge our understanding of design as a universal human ability, but studying these complex contexts through the lenses of design may produce a kind of knowledge that is different from the social sciences (it is discussed in Chapter II). Particularly, we could enlarge our understanding of design as an instrument of social change.

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5. The term ‘non-modern’ “refers to contemporary societies and cultures that have not surrendered to the values and ideologies of modernity” (Poirier 2010: 57).



## 2.1. Doing good: the emergence of social design

Historically, design became recognized as a career path in the Western world with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, as a means of rationalizing serial reproduction (Kaine & Dubuc, 2010). The term ‘design’ emerged in the modern culture and played a vital part in the creation of the consumer society (Reijonen 2004). Since then, “the dominant design paradigm has been of design for the market” (Margolin & Margolin 2002: 24). Designer Victor Papanek, in 1972, opened his well-known book “Design for the Real World” with the following statement:

There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. (...) By designing criminally unsafe automobiles that kill or maim nearly one million people around the world each year, by creating whole new species of permanent garbage to clutter up the landscape, and by choosing materials and processes that pollute the air we breathe, designers have become a dangerous breed. And the skills needed in these activities are taught carefully to young people.

In an age of mass production when everything must be planned and designed, design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself). This demands high social and moral responsibility from the designer. (Papanek 1984: ix)

For several decades, designers have been wondering how they can break the association between their activity and consumerism, how their abilities could be harnessed for social ends (Irwin, Kossoff & Tonkinwise 2015; Margolin 2007). In my field of activity, graphic design, this concern appeared in 1964, with the publication of the “First Things First” manifesto, by Ken Garland. The manifesto brought together graphic designers against the consumerist culture and called for a return to a humanist aspect of design – putting their skills into worthwhile use<sup>6</sup> (Poynor 1999).

This wish to do good gave rise to a new field of design practice: social design (DiSalvo et al. 2011). Social design can be broadly defined as the use of design to address social problems and to contribute to social change (Janzer & Weinstein 2014). Sometimes social design and design for social innovation are used as synonyms. Social innovation

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6. The manifesto was rewritten and republished in 1999, when it attracted over 1600 supporters (firstthingsfirst2014.org)

refers to “new ideas that work in meeting social goals” (Mulgan 2007: 8). Even if there are some conceptual differences between the terms ‘social design’ and ‘design for social innovation’, both describe “a way of doing design that would engage with societal issues to initiate change and support equity” (DiSalvo et al. 2011: 186).

### **My social turn (from graphic to social designer)**

An increasing number of designers crave a chance to work with poor and marginalized communities with the intention of fighting poverty and promoting social justice (Martin 2016; Shea 2012). They see unacceptable life conditions and want to take a part in changing them. And I recognize myself in this movement.

I worked for several years (2001- 2009) as a graphic designer, before going to graduate school<sup>7</sup>. In 2003, I had a professional crisis, as I realized that that I was working to feed consumerism — persuading people to buy things they do not need — and to create garbage. As a consequence of this crisis, I decided to reorient my career and work on the communication of corporate social responsibility and campaigns for social causes. I spent four years doing that, until I had a second crisis. I realized that it is very difficult to separate the communication of initiatives for good causes from communication that stimulate consumerism. A prosperous ‘good-cause’ market has been created for lectures, events, conferences, magazines, internship opportunities, documentary films, consultants, and so on. As Martin (2016) argues, there is a whole “industry” set up to nurture the desires and delusions of ‘saving the world’ and solving other people’s problems.

Moreover, in my graphic design practice, when creating campaigns for social good, I was always using images of indigenous or black people and communities to portray “the poor other in need”. Those people were confined to the role of needy – that is, confined to an inferior position, since the hand that gives is always on top (Wyatt 2016). My question was: *do most social initiatives really benefit the communities they are portraying?*

Furthermore, as I worked with photos of poor communities almost everyday, I started wondering: who are those people? What do they have to say? How do they want to be seen? What kind of project can break the cycle of poverty and really benefit them? All those questions ended up leading me to graduate school and

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7. Maîtrise en aménagement (option Design et complexité) - Université de Montréal (2009-2011)

to reorient my career. However, I have to say that I am in the first place a design practitioner. My motivation to research is focused on producing knowledge about practices — the specific ways to align intentions and means in order to produce the desired outcomes: **how** can designers intervene in the social arena in order to effectively contribute to social justice and social change?

### **Can the wish to do good really do good?**

This is a question that underlies my research practice and I examined in my master thesis. At issue here are not goals and intentions. At issue here are the means and the specific outcomes we aim to create in our pursuit towards social justice, as doing good can take many different forms. We can act with conviction that we are doing good for a community and our actions end up being harmful to the people we were trying to help. The risks of well-intended but ill-conceived actions are considerable when we are working with indigenous cultures.

There are numerous initiatives of design practitioners working in local, poor or marginalized communities<sup>8</sup>. Many design studios involved with social design use processes based on Design thinking or on Human-Center-Design (Janzer & Weinstein 2014). Those approaches have been popularized in a series of toolkits – such as IDEO’s Human-Center-Design (HCD) toolkit, Stanford’s D.school Bootcamp Bootleg, or Project H’s Design Revolution Toolkit<sup>9</sup> – which present a sequence of methods (Mulgan 2014; Shea 2012).

Nevertheless, few of those practices have been documented and assessed to produce knowledge, having little connection with academic research. DiSalvo et al. (2011) state that despite the fact that the idea of social design is decades old, it has received little attention from design research and education. Moreover, as noticed by Janzer and Weinstein, as social design practice is regarded a matter of applying certain methodologies – embodied in the toolkits –, important theoretical and ethical components are missing.

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8. We can find many social design initiatives at online platforms such as DESIGN 21: Design Network ([www.design21sdn.com](http://www.design21sdn.com)), Design Indaba ([www.designindaba.com](http://www.designindaba.com)), and Design for Good ([www.aiga.org/design-for-good](http://www.aiga.org/design-for-good))

9. The toolkits can be accessed at: <http://www.designkit.org/>  
<https://dschool.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/BootcampBootleg2010v2SLIM.pdf>  
<http://impact.sva.edu/core/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/DesignRevolutionToolkit.pdf>

If social design strives to positively reshape the social realm, then social design study, practice, and practitioners must consider, and be able to consider, the macro and micro political, economic, and cultural systems that contribute to the issues and ills that social design seeks to change. (Janzer & Weinstein 2014: 330)

Janzer and Weinstein (2014) argue that social designers must be sensitive to a variety of complex social and cultural factors or they risk contributing to, or practicing, design neocolonialism. In fact, a huge debate in the field of social design was triggered by the very same concern. In 2010, Bruce Nussbaum published<sup>10</sup> an article titled “Is Humanitarian Design the New Imperialism?”, in which he wondered if designers’ desire to help does more harm than good. Nussbaum started a storm with his article and the discussion has spread through the blogosphere, with many social designers defending their practices (Design Observer 2010). Right or wrong, Nussbaum touched a very sensitive spot, and so I will briefly examine these concepts — imperialism and humanitarianism.

### **Oppression, imperialism and humanitarianism**

Paulo Freire (1970) argues that humanitarianism itself maintains and embodies oppression (i.e., social injustice). “It is an instrument of dehumanization”(Freire 1970: 54). One of the features of a situation of oppression is the idea that positive change can only be brought about by the dominant class. Therefore the oppressed cannot do anything valuable, they are fixed in the role of *the-poor-other-in-need*, receiving the title of ‘welfare recipients’. Moreover, Freire states that the ‘generosity’ of the oppressor is often expressed by trying to integrate the oppressed into the ‘good and organized’ society.

The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these "incompetent and lazy" folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be "integrated," "incorporated" into the healthy society that they have "forsaken."

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside"—inside the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves." (Freire 1970: 74)

Likewise, indigenous peoples were and are an integral part of European colonies

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10. On the Co.Design web site of Fast Company magazine.

and post-colonial States. In Canada or in Brazil, we live on indigenous lands. Their oppression is an essential part of our countries' history.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains that Imperialism – and its more specific expression of colonialism – frames the experiences of indigenous peoples. One of the core features of Imperialism is the belief in the superiority of Western knowledge and technology.

One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the 'arts' of civilization. (Smith 1999:25)

The idea of 'helping' indigenous people by providing them with Western technologies is an expression of imperialism that helps to dehumanize the people being helped. Designers who aim to do good should consider whether they are fighting the consequences of colonialism and imperialism, or if they are reinforcing them. Again, this is not a consideration about intentions – it is about the alignment between means and ends.

## **2.2. Research on social design**

Social designers have not yet created a shared theoretical and ethical framework to support and evaluate their practices (Janzer & Weinstein 2014). In this sense, Margolin affirmed that “the worldwide design community has yet to generate profession-wide visions of how its energies might be harnessed for social ends” (2007: 4).

Janzer and Weinstein (2014) made an important theoretical contribution by proposing that social design should be considered as a situation-centered design – instead of human-centered design, whose objective is to produce products and services. They argue that designing objects and services is different from designing social change – which involves changing elements of situations or even entire situations.

Social design must reorient its theoretical philosophy away from traditional human-centered priorities (which tend to be object centric) and shift instead toward new situation centered (social centric) priorities. (Janzer & Weinstein 2014: 328)

Situation-centered design must hold the same concentrated, end-user prioritization that human-centered design does. However, the “end-user” in situation-centered design is social milieu which is comprised of many, often varied, “end-users” as well as the delicate systems and structures in which these “users” interact. A shift in such thinking would serve as an acknowledgment of the complexity of the social spaces this form of design aims to occupy. (Janzer & Weinstein 2014: 329)

Janzer and Weinstein (2014) strongly recommend that social design, as a developing field, establishes bridges with the social sciences. For them, we also have the opportunity to learn “from the history and mistakes that fields like anthropology (playing a hand in colonialism) have made and avoid repeating them” (Janzer & Weinstein 2014: 328).

Richard Buchanan (1992, 2001a) argued that design might be an integrative discipline, exploring concrete integrations of knowledge produced in many fields, which combine theory with practice with the purpose of enriching human life. I agree with him. However, in order to integrate knowledge from different fields, designers need to be familiar with concepts from other fields. Sometimes they are not — as Mulgan (2014) has recently pointed out — and this fact just stresses the importance of developing specific curricula to form designers who will intervene in the social space. For instance, Carl DiSalvo (2015) argues that, in order to re-design business models and create innovations to business, an informed and robust understanding of the multiplicity of ways that value is created and circulated within diverse economic systems is needed. Instead, according to him, designers often treat business as a given.

Along the way we, as designers, must move beyond engaging with ‘business’ to engage with economics, in both practice and theory. To this day I find it shocking that more design students do not read Marx. Not because I expect designers to be Marxists, but because I expect designers to have a sense of the range of possibilities that they might design with and for. To only understand business as we experience it second hand through Silicon Valley or Wall Street is akin to only understanding government as we experience it through Washington DC. Both are perspectives that limit the courses of action designers might take. It is not that Transition Design (or any design) should embrace or reject capitalism or socialism or communism, but designers should understand the pluralism within and across these systems, as a range of opportunities for action. (DiSalvo 2015: 52)

Furthermore, Ezio Manzini (2016) describes the rise of a new culture of design, that is not yet mainstream, which he names ‘emerging design’: “it shifts from traditional, product-oriented design processes to a process for designing solutions to complex

and often intractable social, environmental, and even political problems”(Manzini 2016: 53). Nonetheless, Manzini suggests that the projects that result from emerging design “are complex, hybrid, dynamic entities, and **we do not yet have language for talking about them, history to compare them with, or until now, arenas in which to discuss them**” (2016: 55 – my emphasis).

In my point of view, a designer who aims at promoting social change in a non-modern community should develop a deep understanding of key concepts such as ‘culture’, ‘development’, and ‘identity’. Furthermore, researchers in social design should establish connections between those concepts and the concepts of our discipline.

In this sense, this study intends to build bridges between concepts of the design discipline with concepts of social sciences, in order to propose some theoretical considerations about design actions in indigenous and marginalized communities. Throughout the next pages, design theorists (such as Margolin, Cross, Manzini, Fry, Buchanan, Nelson and Stolterman) are put side-by-side with researchers from other disciplines – e.g., economics (Sen), anthropology (Appadurai, Douglas, Sahlin), sociology (Castells), philosophy (Taylor), development studies (Alkire, Eade, Conradie, Ibrahim, Kabeer), education (Freire), tourism (Cole), and information studies (Srinivasan).

With no question, the most important influences of my study, outside the design discipline, have been Paulo Freire, Arjun Appadurai and Amartya Sen. (a Brazilian and two Indians). Because of my Brazilian upbringing – raised in a highly-educated multi-cultural family, who made me sensitive to racial and social issues – I bring a Third World perspective to the study of First World’s indigenous populations.

### **Working in Canada’s indigenous communities**

Because Canada’s indigenous populations have been object of many neocolonial interventions and policies, the context urges us to be very careful and knowledgeable. Understanding notions such as culture, assimilation, stereotype, development and resilience become imperative. Moreover, the context also demands us to establish long-term collaborations and build relationships of mutual trust.

As Shea (2012) notices, establishing a solid connection with a community is a difficult task – to which designers often are not prepared to.

I learned to understand that community engagement is as complex as humans themselves. It requires designers to work with a range of people who have strong opinions and a lot of emotions and pride invested in their community. A single logo or poster design rarely addresses the totality of the social issue that prompted the designer's engagement in the first place. Instead, designers need to find ways to get to the root of the problem, which is often part of a larger, messier system of issues that need to be dealt with. (Shea 2012: 10)

In short-term interventions – in which designers go to a community to design a product or service that would mitigate a need – we might not have to deal with this messy system of issues. On the other hand, in long-term community engagement, design actions might make visible several hidden issues (what is described in chapter III). We cannot have any illusion that we will use the design process to simply go to a community and address a need or solve a problem. Reality in indigenous communities is much more complex. We are dealing here with ultimate *wicked problems*<sup>11</sup> – in which designers and local stakeholders need to become partners throughout the process of tackling them.

### 3. THE STRUCTURE OF THIS DISSERTATION

The articles presented in this dissertation have two objectives, corresponding to the two levels of this study.

#### 1) Context-based and practical level

Objective: describing the Tapiskwan project and presenting its approach to design workshops –guiding principles, activities and their theoretical basis. The Tapiskwan approach to design workshops is a major outcome of this study.

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11. Rittel [1972] describes wicked problems as "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values". Rittel and Webber (1984) explain that differently from problems that natural scientists deal with – tame problems –, societal problems are inherently wicked. In other words, they cannot be solved through the linear model of solving tame problems, which consists in problem definition (comprehensive analysis) followed by problem solution (synthesis of the right approach determined through the analysis) (Buchanan 1992). Societal problems – e.g., poverty among indigenous peoples – are too complex to be fully understood through comprehensive analyses.



## **2) Theoretical level**

Objective: laying a theoretical groundwork for social designers who aim to work with indigenous peoples. In the articles, I articulated two main concepts – empowerment and identity assertion – with concepts of social sciences and key notions from design studies. I see this conceptual framework as another key outcome of this study.

### **3.1. First article** (Chapter III)

*“Constructing a collaborative project between designers and native actors: an example of the collective articulation of issues”* – Renata Marques Leitão, Anne Marchand and Cedric Sportes<sup>10</sup>

This paper presents the initial trajectory of the collaboration between Atikamekw artisans and cultural stewards with the design team of Université de Montréal, directed by dr. Anne Marchand.

Di Salvo et al. (2011) suggested that designers might play a key role in providing the scope for social innovation by facilitating the collective articulation of issues. They argue that the collective articulation of issues is a foundational practice of social design, comprising an outcome and purpose in its own right. In this paper, I illustrate the proposition of Di Salvo et al. with the first three years of our collaboration – how the issues that came to surface as a consequence of our actions gave rise to the Tapiskwan project.

### **3.2. Second article** (Chapter IV)

*“Design and empowerment within indigenous communities: engaging with materiality”* – Renata Marques Leitão and Anne Marchand

This theoretical article is my contribution to create bridges between the notions of design and empowerment. There are numerous different definitions of empowerment in the literature. In this article, I adopted the definition and conceptualization of empowerment proposed by Naila Kabeer (2001; 2012).

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12. Although I wrote this paper alone, it was based on my conversations with Anne Marchand and Cedric Sportes. It was published in the conference proceedings of Cumulus Milan (Leitão, Marchand & Sportes 2015).

Empowerment ... refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. (Kabeer 2001: 19).

I argue that the ability to make strategic life choices can be enhanced by the practice of design. Kabeer (2001) describes strategic life choices as critical for people to live the lives they want; therefore choices can only be “strategic” when they are linked to a project (e.g., a life project, a collective project, a community project). In other words, an empowered individual or community has developed the capacity to make projects and plans. Since design is a practice of making and realizing projects, I believe that we contribute to the empowerment of members of indigenous communities by nurturing their capacity to design through training and practice.

Another key author used in this paper is Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. By making an argument about an empowering form of training, I am essentially talking about emancipatory education. For Freire (1968/2005, 1996), education is always a political act, used to maintain the status quo or to generate change. He was critical of what he called ‘banking education’, wherein learners are mere receivers — asked to silently absorb the information transmitted by the teacher. “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they developed the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world”(Freire 1970:73). In this sense, social designers are not simply transmitting knowledge to people, but they are supporting and enhancing the ability of people to design for themselves.

### **3.3. Third article** (Chapter V)

*“Tapiskwan Project: A Design Approach to Foster Empowerment among Atikamekw Artisans”*—Renata Marques Leitão, Cédric Sportes, Anne Marchand & Solen Roth<sup>13</sup>

This paper can be seen as the practical and context-based complement of the previous one. In this article, I present the trajectory of the Tapiskwan project and the specific issues of Atikamekw context that have shaped our approach. Usually

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12. This article was accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Design in Society*. Cédric Sportes, Anne Marchand and Solen Roth gave important contributions to the development of the approach to design workshops described in this paper.

designers/artisans collaborations, in poor contexts, focus on creating products for the global market, assuming that the economic gains generated via sales would facilitate socio-economic development. The fact that this project takes place in a developed country, in which the artisans' families receive social welfare, has invited us to move our focus from creating marketable products to creating the conditions for longer-term empowerment. I believe design cannot be seen merely as the activity that conceives marketable goods. Design is about agency – that is, it is the action and ability of creating things that might have an impact in the world.

The Tapiskwan approach to design workshops aims to encourage the empowerment of Atikamekw artisans by: (1) bridging tradition and innovation – i.e., revisiting ancestral Atikamekw iconography through the creation of contemporary products; (2) creating a space in which different generations can work together and share their knowledge and skills; (3) developing agency and self-confidence through design training. This paper describes Tapiskwan's guiding principles, which could inspire similar initiatives within other indigenous communities.

### **3.4. Fourth article** (Chapter VI)

*“Graphic design as an instrument of identity assertion for indigenous peoples: the case of Tapiskwan project”* – Renata Marques Leitao & Anne Marchand

In this paper, I present the Tapiskwan workshops from the perspective of identity assertion. It is divided in two parts: a theoretical and practical and context-based one. In the theoretical part, I aimed to articulate notions about the representation and the construction of cultural identity with notions of graphic design. Graphic design is the activity that organizes visual communication in society (Frascara 1988).

It is concerned with the efficiency of communication, the technology used for its implementation, and the social impact it effects, in other words, with social responsibility. The need for communicative efficiency is a response to the main reason for the existence of any piece of graphic design: someone has something to communicate to someone else. (Frascara 1988: 20)

Three elements are ever present in this activity: (1) the need or desire to communicate something to someone, (2) the choice of visual elements and their organization in order to convey the information, and (3) the technology used to organize and reproduce or convey this information (Frascara 2004).

Several issues related to representation and identity assertion concern visual communication. I argue that a graphic design intervention can contribute to the construction and assertion of a positive identity to peoples who have been marginalized. One aspect of graphic design activity involves the creation and/or communication of a recognizable and distinctive identity, particularly through the use of visual symbols. I argue that that creating a recognizable visual identity for “invisible” peoples is not a matter of co-creating logos and communication tools with indigenous communities. A graphic design approach should create the conditions for the community to embark on a process of identity assertion. It is about encouraging a reflection about that which is essential to our self-image and that which can make us recognizable by others. In this sense, graphic design refers to an essential human power: the power to create representation in order to assert who you are and to influence how you are perceived by others.

## **CHAPTER II**

# **Strategy of inquiry & methodology**

*Action research has been described as a program for change in a social situation, and this is an equally valid description of design. (Swann 2002: 56)*

Design inquiry and action research are relatively new forms of inquiry that have emerged in the second half of 20th century. Their goal is to produce understanding, through action, about the ways in which we can act upon the world in order to purposefully transform it (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003; Cross 2006). These two cultures of inquiry not only aim to understand the world as it is and why it is as it is, they mainly aim to create understanding on the manner we can act to increase the well-being and dignity of people and communities (Buchanan 2001a, 2001b; Reason & Bradbury 2008). Therefore both design inquiry and action research aim to produce knowledge about practices and the ways to align our intentions and our actions in order to produce the desired outcomes (Greenwood & Levin 2003; Kemmis & McTaggart 2008; Nelson & Stolterman 2012). *How can we act upon the world in order to transform it and, ultimately, create the world that we desire?*

The development of new ways to produce knowledge is particularly important in a world in rapid change, in which we face new and increasingly complex challenges (Appadurai 2006; Nelson & Stolterman 2012)

In the struggle to understand and interact in an even more complex and dynamic reality, we believe the current traditions of inquiry and action prevalent in our society do not give us the support we need –as designers and leaders – to meet the emergent challenges that now confront us and will continue to confront us in the future. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 1)

Buchanan (2001a) makes a distinction between what he names old models of research (paleoteric thinking) and new models of research (neoteric thinking). Paleoteric research aims to expand the knowledge of a particular subject matter,

often in greater and greater detail; while the goal of neoteric research is to connect and integrate knowledge from many fields in order to find new ways of addressing the new problems encountered in practical life, creating a new body of knowledge (Buchanan 2001a; Margolin 2010). Buchanan argues that old models of research do not address well many problems of contemporary world.

We possess great knowledge, but the knowledge is fragmented into so great an array of specializations that we cannot find connections and integrations that serve human beings either in their desire to know and understand the world or in their ability to act knowledgeably and responsibly in practical life. While many problems remain to be solved in the fields that currently characterize the old learning—and we must continue to seek better understanding through research in these areas—there are also new problems that are not well addressed by the old structure of learning and the old models of research. (Buchanan 2001a: 6)

These new forms of research might be important in the context of indigenous and local communities who have been experiencing drastic changes in their ways of life – due to environmental factors, lack of access to their ancestral territory, globalization, assimilation policies, etc. (Kipuri 2009). Many of the world's indigenous communities find themselves in an unsatisfactory situation in terms of well-being and human fulfillment. *How can we create a satisfying situation? How can we [researchers and stakeholders] act in order to enable indigenous communities to flourish?*

These questions cannot be addressed by either solely producing knowledge about the problems surrounding indigenous communities, nor by solely understanding how their situation of disempowerment has been created. Certainly, understanding the roots and elements of an unsatisfactory situation is extremely important, as the point of departure of any change "must always be with men and women in the here and now" (Freire 1970: 85).

Those intent on changing elements of situations, or entire situations, must cultivate a thorough understanding of a situation's various underlying social factors – its economy, sociopolitical context(s), the views of its various constituents, and its history. (Janzer & Weistein 2014: 329)

It is fundamental to understand different structures influencing a situation, as it is also important to learn from previous experiences in order to avoid reinventing the wheel or repeating mistakes.

On the other hand, understanding the causes and elements of a problem does



not create by itself the solution, since understanding what is malfunctioning does not create what we do desire. Action in direction of that which we desire can only be created through intention, imagination and innovation (Nelson & Stolterman 2012). To purposefully shape our world, first we have to imagine that which we want to create in the future (idem). *How is this future situation that we long for?*

Moreover, the 'solution' to change an unsatisfactory situation cannot be found through analysis of the problem, regardless of how comprehensive the analysis is (Nelson & Stolterman 2012). This is one of the principles of design inquiry.

The solution is not simply lying there among the data, like the dog among the spots in the well known perceptual puzzle, it has to be actively constructed by the designer's own efforts. (Cross 2006: 8)

And in the process of acting to bring the solution to existence, the own understanding of the nature of the problem is continually reframed (Schön 1983).

In the context of indigenous communities in crisis, both kind of inquiries – into the elements of an unsatisfactory situation, and into actions to create a desirable situation – are complementary. Nelson and Stolterman (2012) argue that to produce an intentional change we need to find out where we are and if and how we can move in the desired direction, in alignment with our intentions.

At issue here is a choice of a strategy to study intentional actions that aim to reshape the conditions of living of indigenous populations. This paper argues that we should make use of action research.

## **1. ACTION RESEARCH**

In designerly ways of knowing, we develop knowing through action (Cross 2006), and this approach is consistent with *Action Research*. Action research is defined as

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice. In participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities (Reason & Bradbury 2008: 4)

Action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. (Bradbury-Huang 2010: 93)

Bradbury-Huang argues that only through action is legitimate understanding possible. “Fundamental to action research is the idea that the social world can only be understood by trying to change it” (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003: 15). Paulo Freire (1968/2005) – whose work is a major inspiration for action researchers – affirms that creation and transformation are fundamental to the development of one’s knowledge and awareness. “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry, human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 1970: 72).

Action upon the real world is indispensable to generate the change that will allow us to increase our understanding and generate a new theory. This new theory would allow us to improve our practices, so that they are more likely to produce desired changes. “The ultimate purpose of any theory is to enable us to do something better in the real world” (Gustavsen 2003: 156). Therefore both design, as a tradition of inquiry, and action-research are concerned with converting actual situations into preferred ones – i.e., with bringing about positive changes in the real world, contributing through practical knowledge to human flourishing (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003; Gustavsen 2003; Schön 1983). Briefly, both traditions are concerned with understanding how the world ought to be and how the world could be, and not only with how the world is.

In action research, researchers collaborate with local stakeholders to seek and enact solutions to problems of major importance to the stakeholders. In this process

community or organizational stakeholders collaborate with professional researchers in defining the objectives, constructing the research questions, learning research skills, pooling knowledge and efforts, conducting the research, interpreting the results, and applying what is learned to produce positive social change. (Greenwood & Levin 2003: 145)

It is noticeable that action research is not only a methodology, it is mainly an orientation of inquiry (Reason & Bradbury 2008; Kindon, Pain & Kesby 2007), or that which Lincoln and Guba (2000) name paradigm: a basic set of beliefs, encompassing ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology. Compared to

conventional academic research, action research has different purposes, is based in different relationships and has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice (Reason & Bradbury 2008). It questions not only the relationship between theory and practice, the relationship between researcher and stakeholders, but also the relationship between university and society (Greenwood & Levin 2003).

### **Why action research?**

Action research emerged from the acknowledgement of the failure of conventional social science to address some persistent social problems and to engage problems in the sites where they occur (Lincoln 2001). In contrast to conventional social science, “action research focuses on solving real problems, so the central inquiry processes of action research are linked to solving practical problems in specific locations” (Greenwood & Levin 2003: 150). The objectives of the inquiry should be identified by the stakeholders around issues that they consider significant for their lives (Bradbury-Huang 2010).

In action research, local stakeholders collaborate with researchers to define the problems to be addressed, to gather information and to design an intentional action. And, since this process demands time and effort, stakeholders would not waste their time in a project that does not address issues of vital importance to them (Bradbury-Huang 2010; Greenwood & Levin 2003).

### **1.1. Participatory Action Research (PAR)**

The term ‘action-research’ represents a ‘family’ of research approaches that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003). In the family of action research, the approaches aiming to empower marginalized or vulnerable people are named **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**<sup>1</sup> (Grant, Nelson & Mitchell 2008; Kindon et al. 2007). Participants of PAR studies are members of social groups who usually do not participate in the academic production

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1. For some authors the terms ‘action research’ and ‘participatory action research’ are interchangeable, since “action research is participative research, and all participative research must be action research” (Reason & Bradbury 2006: 2). I believe that PAR, at its roots, is particularly about challenging oppression, Imperialism or Eurocentrism.

of knowledge – including indigenous populations – therefore most political decisions that directly affect their lives are taken by outsiders based in studies made from experts from an etic perspective (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001). In this sense, PAR represents a counter-hegemonic approach to knowledge production, embodying a commitment to break the monopoly on who holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken by explicitly collaborating with marginalized and vulnerable people (Bradbury-Huang 2010; Kindon et al. 2007).

PAR is rooted in the work of Third World authors such as Paulo Freire, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Anisur Rahman, Orlando Fals-Borda and others who developed an approach to challenge oppression – that is, imperialism and its consequences (Gutiérrez 2016; Fals-Borda 2013; Kemmis & McTaggart 2008; Streck & Holiday 2015; Swantz 2015). PAR is also about challenging Eurocentrism in academic production (Fals-Borda 2001, 2013)

My two main references in PAR are Freire and Fals Borda, who are South Americans like me. I believe that my Third-World, South-American perspective is something valuable that I bring to Tapiskwan project and to the study of the empowerment of Canadian indigenous peoples.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.2. Reconstructing the relationship between universities and society**

Another claim for the development of participatory and practical forms of research is the need to reconstruct the relationships between universities and society (Greenwood & Levin 2003), "extending knowledge beyond the library or laboratory in order to serve the purpose of enriching human life" (Buchanan 1992: 7). Currently, many social groups are poorly connected to universities and rarely influence university research agenda (Greenwood & Levin 2003). Nevertheless, the rapid changes of the contemporary world make knowledge of the world increasingly important for everybody everywhere (Appadurai 2006). In this sense, Appadurai argues

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2. A very interesting research topic would be the similarities and differences between Third World methodologies and Indigenous methodologies developed within First World countries (Louis 2007; Martin 2003; Rigney 1999; Smith 1999). Both perspectives are essentially about fighting imperialism and its consequences – but using different vocabularies. First World Indigenous methodologies use the term 'decolonization' very often, whereas in South-American approaches this term is rarely used (therefore I tend not to use it).

it is important to deparochialise the idea of research and make it more widely available to young people with a wide range of interests and aspirations. Research, in this sense, is not only the production of original ideas and new knowledge (as it is normally defined in academia and other knowledge-based institutions). It is also something simpler and deeper. It is the capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one's current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal or aspiration. (2006: 176)

This is especially so in a world of rapid change, where markets, media, and migration have destabilized secure knowledge niches and have rapidly made it less possible for ordinary citizens to rely on knowledge drawn from traditional, customary or local sources. (2006: 167)

In the case of indigenous and local populations, they are going through a complex transformation in their ways of life, while connecting and negotiating with global society, having to deal with different ideas, values, information technologies, aesthetics, markets, techniques, etc. (Conradie 2013; UNESCO 2009). The increasing need for knowledge about the world makes "it hard for people with strictly local knowledge to improve their circumstances" (Appadurai 2006).

The capacity to do research, in this broad sense, is also tied to what I have recently called 'the capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004), the social and cultural capacity to plan, hope, desire, and achieve socially valuable goals. (...) In the current context, I can only suggest that the capacity to aspire and the right to research are necessarily and intimately connected. Without aspiration, there is no pressure to know more. And without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates into fantasy or despair. (Appadurai 2006: 176-177)

*But what kind of knowledge? And how can native populations obtain or produce it?*

(...) societies have constructed different logical systems and visions of the world to explain the relationship of human beings to nature, the universe and the world of thought and emotion. These logical systems serve to organize the knowledge stemming from this relationship, in particular on the basis of observations and experience. Knowledge is meaningful only within the logical system within which it is embedded. (UNESCO 2009: 114)

In this sense, action researchers recognize that knowledge is socially constructed and that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003). Western society values scientific knowledge above any other knowledge system. Therefore that which is considered valid forms to produce knowledge and that which consists credible knowledge is deeply shaped by our value system (UNESCO 2009). Knowledge systems from indigenous populations are often considered primitive and backward, and, consequently, disregarded (Arruda 1999).

### 1.3. Whose knowledge?

In the conventional Western worldview, interventions often aim to transfer – or to provide local communities with access to – scientific or professional knowledge. With falling costs of information and communication technologies (ICTs), governments and professionals have attempted to enable local communities to access external information. “Some projects have been developed on the assumption that the mere presence of access-oriented information technologies and portals can generate learning critical for development” (Srinivasan 2012: 25). These assumptions have proved to be erroneous as those projects fail to encourage self-determination and agency from within the community (Eade 2007; Sreekumar 2007 ; Srinivasan 2012). “The effort to engage rural communities within information access initiatives is inclusive in a manner that perpetuates their subordinate position”(Srinivasan 2012: 25). Experience shows that transfer of resources (material or immaterial) usually does not result in the development and empowerment of communities that receive the resources (Eade 2007; Kabeer 2001). On the contrary, it has created a notion of ‘cultural inferiority’, i.e., the idea that knowledge and skills of external experts are more valuable than local assets (Douglas 2004; Manzini 2005). Overestimating external knowledge to the detriment of local knowledge contributes to the disempowerment of native communities (Gaventa & Cornwall 2001; UNESCO 2009).

Action research is built on an interaction between local knowledge and professional knowledge (Greenwood & Levin 2003). In this interaction, new knowledge is co-constructed by researchers and stakeholders.

Only local stakeholders, with their years of experience in a particular situation, have sufficient information and knowledge about the situation to design effective social change processes. (...) It is a cogenerative process precisely because both types of knowledge are essential to it. (Greenwood & Levin 2003: 150)

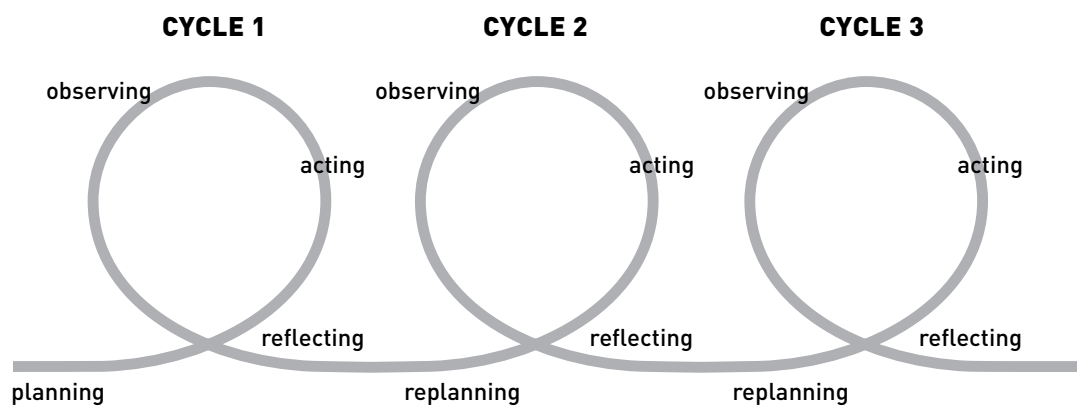
“A key value shared by action researchers, then, is this abiding respect for people’s knowledge and for their ability to understand and address the issues confronting them and their communities” (Brydon-Miller et al. 2003: 14). Through the collaboration between researchers and stakeholders, action research aims to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the conduct of their lives (Reason & Bradbury 2008). In this sense, “PAR knowledge is active and NOT passive (...). Research findings become launching pads for ideas, actions, plans, and strategies to initiate social change” (Cammarota & Fine 2007).

### 1.4. Cyclical inquiry and the study of practice

The methodology of an action-research is structured as a cyclical process of action and reflection, described as:

planning a change, acting and observing the process and the consequences of the change, reflecting on these processes and consequences, and then replanning, acting and observing, reflecting, and so on..." (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000).

In action phases co-researchers test practices and gather evidence; in reflection stages they make sense together and plan future actions (Reason & Bradbury 2008). For example:



**IMAGE 8:** Cycles of action and reflection

Researchers and participants identify an issue or situation in need of change; they then initiate research that draws on capabilities and assets to precipitate relevant action. Both researchers and participants reflect on, and learn from, this action and proceed to a new cycle of research/action/reflection. (Kindon et al. 2007: 1-2)

Even though participatory action research is usually described in terms of a spiral of action and reflection, Kemmis and McTaggart (2008) explain that PAR is mainly about studying, reframing, and transforming social practices.

Participatory action research is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social world in which, for better or worse, we live with the consequences of one another's actions. (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 277).

*What kind of practice?* For Kemmis and McTaggart (2008), PAR focuses on changing

particular practitioners' particular practices, instead of being interested in practices in general or in the abstract.

It should also be stressed that participatory action research involves the investigation of *actual* practices and not *abstract* practices. It involves learning about the real, material, concrete, and particular practices of particular people in particular places. (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 277)

Similarly, a design inquiry focuses on the ultimate particular and real (Buchanan 1992; Nelson & Stolterman 2012). "An action taken by an individual at a specific time and place is an example of something that is ultimate particular. The outcome of a design process, such as a chair, a curriculum, or a policy, is an ultimate particular" (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 31). For Kemmis and McTaggart (2008), focusing on practices in a concrete and specific way makes them accessible for reflection, discussion, and reconstruction, and allows them to be transformed. In this sense, reflecting on the real concrete practices, and the concrete situation in which they take place, allows us to reflect more deeply about our past, present and future circumstances and to refine our intentionality.

In our view, participatory action researchers do not need to apologize for seeing their work as mundane and mired in history; on the contrary, by doing so, they may avoid some of the philosophical and practical dangers of the idealism that suggests that a more abstract view of practice might make it possible to transcend or rise above history and to avoid the delusions of the view that it is possible to find a safe haven in abstract propositions that construe but do not themselves constitute practice. (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 278)

Kemmis and McTaggart claim that abstract propositions do not reconstruct concrete practices or change real situations. Their claim is similar to Nelson and Stolterman's argument that scientific truths (abstractions) may allow us to understand that which exists, but "cannot provide insight in what should be brought to existence, through intention, imagination, and innovation" (2012: 28). PAR is "a process of learning, with others, by doing—changing the ways in which we interact in a shared social world" (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 283). "So action research is about working towards practical outcomes. And also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless" (Reason & Bradbury 2008: 4). The outcome of PAR is a transformation of both theory (understanding) and practice (action).



### 1.5. Studying the transformation of practices

Kemmis and McTaggart argue that it is fundamental to discuss the research on practice from the epistemological and ontological choices, that is,

choices about what it means to *know* a practice (the epistemological choice) and about what a practice is and thus how it manifests itself in reality (the ontological choice). If research on practice is *methodologically defined*, however, researchers may obscure, even from themselves, the epistemological and ontological choices that underpin their choices of methods. (2008: 288).

Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) described five different approaches to the study of practice, reflecting different kinds of relationships between the researcher and the researched: (1) practice as individual behavior, to be studied objectively; (2) practice as group behavior or ritual, to be studied objectively; (3) practice as an individual action, to be studied from the perspective of the subjective; (4) practice as social action or tradition, to be understood from the perspective of the subjective; (5) practice as reflexive, to be studied dialectically. "This last perspective on practice is the one taken by participant-researchers in participatory action research" (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 289).

In this view, it is necessary to understand practice as enacted by individuals who act in the context of history. Similarly, it is necessary to understand practices as having both objective (externally given) and subjective (internally understood and interpreted) aspects, both of which are necessary to understand how any practice is really practiced, how it is constituted historically and socially, and how it can be transformed (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000: 578).

This perspective is described as 'reflexive', because changing the objective conditions changes the way in which a situation is interpreted, which in turn changes how people act on the real world, and so on (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). Likewise, design is about reflection in action. Using a design reasoning, the understanding of complex situations is only created by engaging actively with the specifics of the particular situation – understanding is gained through action – and this understanding, in return, reshapes our actions and their outcomes, which will reshape our understanding, and so on (Cross 2006; Nelson & Stolterman 2012). Schön (1983) names the design process as a reflexive conversation with the situation.

Paulo Freire argues that we need to consider the objective and subjective aspect of praxis: "people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the human-world relationship" (1970: 85). Therefore, the action

researcher will want to explore how changing 'objective' circumstances (e.g., performances, events, resources, patterns of interaction, rules, roles) shapes and is shaped by the 'subjective' conditions of participants' perspectives (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008).

In this reflexive view of practice, **practitioners regard themselves as explicitly engaged in action that makes history** (idem). For Freire (1968/2005), since humans exist in a world which they are constantly re-creating and transforming, humans are historical beings always in the process of becoming – “as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire 1970: 84). Similarly, Nelson and Stolterman argue that “as human beings, we continuously create things that help reshape the reality and essence of the world as we know it” (2012: 1).

In this view of practice, as **projected through history**, we are not studying the given (objective or subjective), but the process of becoming, of coming to existence.

And we see that the outcomes of participatory action research are to be read in terms of historical consequences for participants and others involved and affected by the action people have taken, judged not only against the criterion of truth but also against the criteria of wisdom and prudence, that is, whether people were better off in terms of the consequences they experienced. (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008: 322)

And being a historical process, Kemmis and McTaggart explain, the criterion of success of an action research is whether the participants "have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice" (2008: 277). For Kemmis and McTaggart (2000) the fact that the stakeholders will have to live the consequences of the transformations caused by the intervention provides the best 'reality check' of its quality and worth.

## **2. DESIGN ACTION AND ACTION RESEARCH**

Stoecker (2009) – examining 232 community based, participatory or action-oriented research projects – argues that many action researchers, in spite of their good intentions, use the terms participatory action research or community based research without emphasizing either participation or action, and without linking

research and action. Stoecker's study suggests that most research does not support any direct action.

I have become increasingly concerned that, while we have good intentions, we have not developed a coherent theoretical model of participatory and action-oriented research that can support effective practice. (Stoecker 2009: 386)

Since social change cannot happen without action, Stoecker argues that "only when research is embedded in an effective overall social change strategy that it matters" (2012: 83). Most projects assessed in Stoecker's study were diagnostic, "attempting to understand the scope or causes of a problem or issue" (2009: 390). There is a common belief that the understanding of a situation may produce changes – i.e., a belief that research is causal in itself (Stoecker 2012). Nevertheless, as stated by Nelson and Stolterman (2012), description and explanation do not prescribe action.

An important goal of PAR is the development of "voice" of disempowerment actors (Freire 1970; Hirschman 1970), something considered as emancipatory (Srinivasan 2006). Much of the discourse around voice is based on Freire's work, which was related to verbal literacy (Freire 1970; Srinivasan 2012). Very often "voice" is seen as the capacity to express verbally issues and concerns and, consequently, it is "a vehicle for communicating and potentially influencing decision makers at local, national and global levels" (Mistry, Bignante & Berardi 2014: 1). I believe, however, that this understanding of 'voice' as verbal expression is very limiting. Ultimately, voice is the capacity to express your ideas and to act upon the world in order to transform it (Freire 1970). Ideas can also be expressed through sketches, prototypes, projects, actions, and so on. I propose that the emancipatory feature of voice is not only the capacity to verbalize an understanding, but mainly the capacity to give shape to your ideas and to act on your own interests.

## **2.1. Linking research and action**

Stoecker argues that "the literature has not provided clear statements on how to link research and action" (2009: 389). In order to bridge this gap, he suggested that action researchers use a project based approach – i.e., diagnosing some condition, prescribing an intervention, implementing that intervention and evaluating the outcomes. "Research can play a role at each stage of the process, but only as part of a broader strategy linking knowledge, action, and power" (Stoecker 2012: 83)

Furthermore, he suggests that we should to start our projects by stating "**what our intended action outcomes are and then design the research, rather than doing research and then hoping some action comes out of it**" (Stoecker 2009: 399).

It seems that the kind of action suggested by Stoecker is a design action – i.e., an action aiming to create a desirable outcome, transforming a given situation into a preferred one. In this point of view, action research might be conceived as research on a design initiative.

In conventional action-research, research is a meta-practice through which the participants develop awareness of the practice they are actually investigating (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008). In a project-based action research – or what we could name as design-based action research – design becomes a meta-practice. In other words, in conventional action research, stakeholders receive training as researchers in order to investigate the forces affecting their practices and lives. The expected outcome of this process is voice. On the other hand, using a design-based action research, participants receive design training in order to make projects and realize them through their actual practices. The expected outcome of this process is agency (as discussed in chapter IV).

### **3. DESIGN INITIATIVE: THE CASE OF TAPISKWAN PROJECT**

Ezio Manzini (2015) has described some features of a design initiative that aims to promote social change.

Every design initiative is the result of coordinated action by a group of social actors who have come to an agreement about what to do and how to do it. These *designing coalitions* do not emerge by chance; they are themselves the result of design. (...) The *designing coalitions* must certainly include subjects who can bring all the necessary skills to bear, including those of the users/co-producers (who together constitute the design team in a strict sense). However, it must also involve the political figures required to give the ideas that may emerge some hope of success (Manzini 2015: 69).

The design coalition formed between designers of Université de Montréal and members of the Atikamekw Nation has been named *Collectif Tapiskwan*. It started to be formed in 2011, from the initiative of the cultural representative of the Council of the Atikamekw Nation – Christian Coocoo – who established a partnership

with dr. Anne Marchand and her design team. The coalition was formed during the last five years, as artists, artisans, cultural stewards and entrepreneurs of the Atikamekw Nation, and non-indigenous designers and researchers in the fields of anthropology, management and social economy joined the group. As a collaborative encounter, all the people involved exchange their experiences and expertise in order to do something that “they all recognize as a value” (Manzini 2015: 93). All the members of this collective recognize the value of that which we are trying to create through the Tapiskwan project, and everyone has a valuable contribution to offer. All the members can give ideas and have a say in defining the vision, the priorities and the strategies. Dr. Marchand leads the coalition. The last word, however, belongs to the Atikamekw partners.

*A coalition must be formed around a vision or a program (what to do and how to do it)* (Manzini 2015: 70). The vision<sup>2</sup> of the collective is using Atikamekw art (craft is seen as a form of art in Atikamekw culture) as an instrument to encourage self-determination, identity assertion and well-being. The program of *Collectif Tapiskwan* is about developing design workshops and training strategies in order to revitalize Atikamekw arts, enhance the intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage and bridge tradition and innovation. The collective also aims to develop a commercial enterprise in order to encourage the socio-economic development of Atikamekw communities through their arts.

At the same time, this vision and program can only take shape in the conversation among actors. Managing the delicate balance between the need to put forward ideas and that of gathering ideas from the others is the first and most fundamental capacity that design experts must show they possess. (Manzini 2015: 70)

The expert designer in those circumstances cannot only gather ideas and search for consensus. Consensus is frequently an enemy of innovation. Very often, in collaborative projects, designers are seen as facilitators of dialogue only. Manzini (2016) criticizes this approach, which he names “post-it design”.

Design experts take a step backward and consider their role simply as that of “process facilitators,” asking other actors for their opinions and wishes, writing them on small pieces of paper, and sticking them on the wall and then synthesizing them. (Manzini 2016: 58)

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2. The vision and the program were formally formulated in a meeting that took place in April 22nd 2016, with the presence of most members of the Collectif Tapiskwan: Karine Awashish, Christiane Biroté, Christian Coocoo, Caoimhe Isha Beaulé, Clode Jalette, Anne Marchand, Renata Marques Leitao, Jacques Newashish, Marlei Pozzebon, Fabio Prado Saldanha, Solen Roth and Cédric Sportes.

Manzini argues that creative ideas and design culture tend to disappear with this approach. For him, expert designers who take part in a collaborative initiative should develop the capacity to listen, but they also need to learn to propose their own ideas and visions.

### 3.1 The role of the designer

Toomey (2011) describes four roles practitioners may play in community development practice, which may serve to empower communities. Designers in a collaborative project, as suggested by Manzini (2015), should play a mix of two roles: facilitators and catalysts.

**Facilitators** bring people together and gather ideas. Toomey explains that facilitators are “vital in order to get the community on the same page by providing spaces in which people can meet and by guiding people through brainstorming activities in which new ideas or solutions to community problems can arise” (2011: 190).

Designers also act as **catalysts**, whose objective is to spark a new idea or action. “Catalysts tend to work in indirect ways, as their role is to get the ball rolling, but not to undertake the responsibility of keeping it moving” (Toomey 2011). Accordingly, Manzini suggests that designers are responsible for sparking off new initiatives, feed social conversations and help the process of convergence toward commonly recognized visions and outcomes (2015: 67).

How to balance these two roles: listening and gathering ideas vs. putting ideas forward? I propose that it is possible to play both roles by establishing that which Nelson and Stolterman (2012) define as a service relationship. They argue that design is ideally about service on behalf of the other. The act of producing proposals or conjectures of solutions to the problems presented by the client is central to designing (Cross 2011).

Being in service does not mean being a servant, or subservient. It does not mean acting as a mere facilitator on behalf of someone else’s needs. (...)

We should also point out that service is not about helping people create what they already know they want. The success of the design process can best be determined when those being served experience the surprise of self-recognition. This comes when that which emerges from a design process meets and exceeds the client’s original expression of that which they (usually only dimly) perceived as desirable in the beginning. This original

expression of what is desired is known as the client's desiderata. The designer's role is to midwife that desiderata, which could not have been imagined from the beginning by either client or designer, and to provide end results in the form of as expected unexpected outcome (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 42).

This is an intuitive process in which designers listen and make sense of that which has been expressed by the client and also to that which has not been expressed, but is somehow present.

Clients may fully know what is concretely desired in the beginning. They are only aware that something is pressing for expression (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 43).

Design communication is about listening. It is about helping people to express what they believe will help them live fuller lives. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 46)

The role of the designers is about bringing to surface a clearer articulation of a client's desiderata as an idea that may spark action. Therefore, this process of listening comprises a creative and intuitive synthesis in which many elements (explicit and implicit) are articulated in a coherent and actionable whole<sup>3</sup>.

The designer often telescopes a mass of fragmented bits of information and then—usually after a period of incubation— invents a coherent and often elegant proposition that embodies all or most of the rag-bag of bits. (Swann 2002: 54)

In the case of the Tapiskwan project, we designers see the Atikamekw partners – who are members of the collective – as our clients. Their intentionality guides our actions. Using the triad of designer/client/end-user, the end-users of our designs (the actions and workshops conceived by our coalition) are the Atikamekw communities.

For sure, none of our collaborators has suggested a methodology of design workshops based on traditional iconography. I spent two years (2011-2013) listening to Atikamekw artisans and talking frequently with two partners: Christian Coocoo (cultural steward) and Jacques Newashish (a multidisciplinary artist, who sets as a priority to share his knowledge with youth)<sup>4</sup>. When I presented the idea of revitalizing Atikamekw's graphic heritage to Mr. Coocoo –and how I intended to carry on that idea –, he had the exact surprise of self-recognition (as mentioned

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3. Before going back to school to pursue graduate studies, I worked as a graphic designer for many years, and in my professional practice I have always established this kind of service relationship. About 15 years ago, my sister asked me why I did not do what the clients asked me to do. I answered that I do what they want but they do not know it yet or they do not know how to express it. Therefore, I have a long practice in articulating and giving coherence to implicit requests.

4. At that time the Collectif Tapiskwan was not yet formed and we collaborated with a few stakeholders.

by Nelson and Stolterman). He said that he had always dreamed about doing something similar, but he had never been able to conceive a project from that longing. Likewise, Mr. Newashish recognized himself in my proposal of workshops and has collaborated in its development as something meaningful to him.

#### **4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES**

This study had two levels: (1) practical and context-specific and (2) theoretical.

##### **Level 1**

The development of a strategy of design workshops – offered to Atikamekw artisans and youth – is a major outcome of this study. The strategy of workshops has been tailored to address the issues identified by the Atikamekw partners in the context of Atikamekw communities.

This strategy aimed to:

- (a)** revitalize and increase the appreciation of Atikamekw iconographic heritage – enabling Atikamekws to recognize that the visual symbols of their culture are precious resources for their self-representation;
- (b)** introduce the participants to design skills (particularly to the ones related to product design and visual communication) and printing techniques – enabling participants to develop their creativity and their competences in terms of visual expression;
- (c)** enhance the participants' capacity to conceive and realize projects and the capacity to represent themselves.

The outcome is a straightforward formula: a sequence of activities and presentations (described in chapter VI). The method was conceived as a straightforward step-by-step in order to enable Atikamekw artists, artisans and educators to reproduce the recipe independently in the future, without the presence of the design team.

Nelson and Stolterman (2012) claim that the outcome of a design process is an ultimate particular – be it an object, a symbol, a service, an activity or a curriculum. Therefore the strategy of design workshops developed in this study, being tailored to the Atikamekw context, is an ultimate particular, it does not aim to be applicable to



other of contexts. However, the councilors of the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw [CNA - Council of the Atikamekw Nation] asked me to consider this project as a pilot-study that would generate knowledge and an approach of workshops that could be useful to other indigenous communities.

Literature in social innovation reports the difficulties in transferring or replicating a program from one context to another with similar impact (Bradach 2003; Mulgan 2006; Mulgan et al. 2007). “A huge number of failures of ‘transfer attempts’ is therefore documented, corroborating the complexity of the issue” (Pozzebon & Saldanha 2016: 1). In transferring a social program from one context to another, Wazir and Van Oudenhoven (1998) suggest that we should not try to mount identical programs, but rather to recognize an opportunity for mutual learning and sharing of experience. In the same vein, Pozzebon and Saldanha (2016) suggest that more important than conceiving a recipe to be replicated is to identify the core principles of the social innovation program that can inform local adaptations.

Therefore, this study has **the objective of presenting the development of the guiding principles of Tapiskwan workshops and their theoretical basis, in order to inform and inspire future projects in design in indigenous contexts.**

Even though there are no standard or universal solutions, studying earlier design as case studies helps designers become aware of the specifics of each unique design situation, of the design judgments made in response to that unique design challenge, as well as of the final outcome. This immersion in the totality of past design projects develops a sensibility and appreciation in designers for the process of creating an ultimate particular design, but it does not provide pat answers for future designs – only the mood and the spirit of good design. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 161)

## **Level 2**

Knowledge from several disciplines has been mobilized in the process of conceiving this strategy of workshops. The reflections that emerged in action have nurtured the theoretical understanding.

Since design theory related to development and cultural issues is very rudimentary (Oosterlaken 2009), this study also aims to present:

**(a)** theoretical considerations about the roles a social designer can play in interventions and in long-term community projects that aims at social innovation.

(b) basic notions from social sciences that are fundamental to a social designer who wants to work in indigenous or multi-cultural contexts – therefore laying a conceptual framework for social designers who aim to work with indigenous peoples. I articulated concepts from social sciences – e.g., ‘culture’, ‘development’, ‘identity’ and ‘empowerment’ – and key notions from design studies. This conceptual framework is another key outcome of this study.

This is not an extensive or profound research about empowerment, culture or identity. On the contrary, to better understand the Atikamekw context I had to probe into a huge range of subjects from several disciplines. The conceptual framework presented in this dissertation articulates the concepts and theories that were mobilized to conceive the Tapiskwan approach to workshops. In other words, it is an articulation of the concepts that guided the design process.

	<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<b>LEVEL 2</b>
	<b>Context-based and practical</b>	<b>Theoretical</b>
<b>Research approach</b>	Participatory action research	Litterature review and reflection in action
<b>Objectives</b>	<p>A) Conceiving a strategy of design workshops tailored to address the issues identified by the Atikamekw partners.</p> <p>B) Presenting the approach used to develop the strategy of workshops and its guiding principles in order to inform and inspire future projects in design in indigenous contexts.</p>	<p>A) Conceiving a conceptual framework that could inform social designers who desire to intervene in indigenous communities.</p> <p>B) Understanding how design interventions could contribute to address complex social problems within indigenous communities.</p>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<p>A) Tapiskwan approach to workshops. A step-by-step sequence of activities and presentations.</p> <p>B) The guiding principles of Tapiskwan workshops and their theoretical basis. And the story behind the development of the approach: the issues and challenges and how they were addressed.</p>	<p>A) The articulation of the concepts and theories that were mobilized in the process of conceiving the Tapiskwan approach.</p> <p>B) Theoretical considerations about the roles a social designer can play in long-term community projects that aim at social innovation.</p>

**TABLE 2:** The two levels of this study with the respective objectives and outcomes.

## 5. PHASES OF THE PROJECT

### PHASE 1 (2011/June 2013)

#### Setting the goals and constructing the conceptual framework

The problems addressed by this project and the potential solutions were identified in conversations with the Atikamekw artists and artisans and members of the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw (CNA). Since January 2011 – that is, before even starting my PhD program – I have been part of the research group led by prof. Anne Marchand. I was part of her team, as a research assistant, during an eight-week cycle of creative workshops offered to Atikamekw artisans in the summer of 2011. I consider that the main outcome of this cycle of workshops was the identification of a series of challenges and opportunities to Atikamekw artisans' development. In follow up actions and discussions, I had the opportunity to better frame the wicked problems surrounding the production of Atikamekw crafts nowadays. A distinguishing feature of dealing with wicked problems is that we only understand the problem through the generation and test of conjectured solutions (Buchanan 1992; Cross 2006)

To find the problem is thus the same thing as finding the solution. (...) The process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution (or re-solution) is identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered. (Rittel & Webber 1984:137)

Therefore, I formulated a conjectured 'solution' in terms of developing design workshops based on Atikamekw graphic heritage (which is described in chapters III, V and VI).

In this first phase, I started constructing the conceptual framework of the study, which is "the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research" (Maxwell 2009: 222). Guided by the issues that emerged in the field, I did a multidisciplinary literature review.

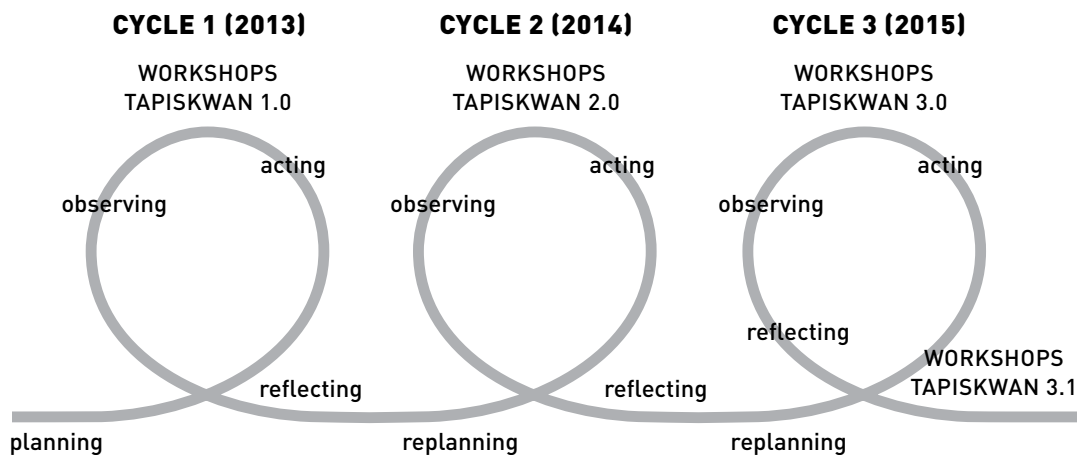
Maxwell stresses that a conceptual framework is a construction that incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere "but the structure, the overall coherence, is something that you build, not something that exists ready-made" (2009: 223). It is even truer because there is not a literature in design about the work with indigenous communities. Therefore I had to immerse myself in anthropology and development

studies and to articulate concepts of those disciplines with concepts of design. I also dipped into the literature of tourism (authenticity), sociology, information studies and education. The question that guided my initial literature review was “What should a designer know in order to better intervene in an indigenous community?”. The issues that emerged during this study have continually guided me back to the literature in order to deepen the initial conceptual framework.

## PHASE 2 – (July 2013/October 2015)

### Development of the workshops<sup>5</sup>

Developing the strategy of workshops was a collaborative and ongoing learning process, in which we (the design team and Atikamekw partners) formulated a problem, devised the program of a cycle of workshops, gave the workshops, observed and reflected on the results, discussed the lessons learned, identified issues, opportunities and hindrances, devised some follow-up action, identified new goals and challenges, devised the program of a new cycle of workshops, and so on. We developed the approach in three cycles of workshops – between 2013 and 2015 – which were part of the fieldwork of my study. All the workshops were facilitated by Cedric Sportes and me.



**IMAGE 9:** Cycles of the workshops Tapiskwan.

5. The workshops are described at the end of this chapter

**First Cycle – Tapiskwan 1.0 (2013)**

July 26th to 31st (6 days) in La Tuque

This first cycle was conceived as a pilot-activity. We were testing the interest of the participants for this approach: using traditional symbols in order to create contemporary products, having an accomplished artisan (Christiane Biroté) to mentor the young participants, adopting a fast pace of activities, establishing challenging objectives for the workshops, learning the meaning and stories associated with the symbols from a respected cultural steward (Charles Coocoo).

We were absolutely surprised by the interest demonstrated by the participants. Teachers, social workers, researchers and artists who work amid Quebec's First Nations had told us numerous stories about the lack of interest demonstrated by youth, the fact that they very often drop out in the middle of training programs, the "Indian time" (that is, the fact that participants are always late). In fact, we experienced exactly the contrary. For instance, the participants arrived early (sometimes even earlier than us). We were supposed to finish our activities at 17h00, but the participants asked us to stay till 18h30 almost every evening. They demonstrated a great deal of initiative, motivation and creativity.

After this pilot activity, we thought that we could continue working with a part of this group and develop their design abilities. However, our main collaborator at that time – our gatekeeper, who was supposed to coordinate the follow up activities and the sale of the products conceived in the workshops – proved to be unreliable. Without a gatekeeper, in 2014, we had to re-start the process of recruiting participants and establishing alliances in the community from zero.

**Second cycle (2014)**

July 15 to 22nd (2 weeks) - in Wemotaci

In this second cycle, we refined the approach conceived in 2013. We spent more time in drawing activities, included activities of visual composition and created presentations to discuss issues related to identity and self-representation. We also worked with three major artists as mentors (Christiane Biroté, Jacques Newashish and Eruoma Awashish). Without a local gatekeeper, it was very difficult to recruit participants in Wemotaci. Two mentors, Christiane Biroté and Jacques Newashish, helped us to overcome this problem by knocking door-to-

door in order to invite people to participate. Since then, they became the local coordinators of the Tapiskwan project.

Because of the recruitment troubles, most participants of this second edition were very young (11-13 years old) and the content of our presentations and activities was not adapted to them. The experience also allowed some reflections that we used in order to refine our approach: (a) we realized that we had to print the products in the communities, therefore we included a training in artisanal printing in the following edition; (b) we added a phase of cultural immersion before the creative activities; (c) we enhanced the exercises of visual composition (as described in chapter VI).

In 2014, we also established new and solid partnerships in the Atikamekw communities. The group of collaborators that came together at that moment constitutes the basis of Collectif Tapiskwan.

### **Third cycle (2015)**

#### **Tapiskwan 3.0**

July 13-24 (2 weeks) in Wemotaci

In the third cycle, we worked with a group of participants from several generations. The activities of this edition are described in chapters V and VI.

#### **Tapiskwan 3.1 - production workshops**

October 10-12 (3 days) in Wemotaci

Because of the participants' manifested enthusiasm for their newly acquired skills, we decided to hold a three-day production workshop, in October, so that they could apply what they had learned to the creation of a small line of products.

### **PHASE 3 – (November 2015/October 2016)**

#### **Synthesis of the experience**

The reflections that emerged in action, the qualitative data gathered during the workshops and follow-up actions, and the literature review were articulated around two main theoretical themes: empowerment and identity assertion.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

This study was conceived as a Participatory Action Research project. I made use of a qualitative approach in order to document the process of action.

### 6.1 Participants

This study employed two different levels of participation of members of Atikamekw communities:

**1. Collaborators in the design coalition (Collectif Tapiskwan):** members of the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw (CNA) and major Atikamekw artists and artisans. They take part in (1) the definition of the goals of the workshops; (2) the development of the strategy; (3) the planning of the actions; (4) the definition of criteria to select the participants of the workshops; (5) assessment of the results. Each step of the project has been discussed with them. Their opinion has had major importance to set the goals of the workshops, to adjust activities and methods, and to plan follow-up actions.

The collaborators who helped to create the approach remained the same throughout the project – except for the first local coordinator, who left the project in 2014. This group is: Christian Coocoo, cultural representative of the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw; Christiane Biroté, who worked as a mentor in every edition of Tapiskwan workshops and is our local coordinator; and Jacques Newashish, who worked as a mentor in 2014 and 2015, and helped to conceive the Tapiskwan approach (in 2012-2013). A cultural steward, Charles Coocoo, and an artistic mentor, Eruoma Awashish, also participated in three cycles.

In 2015, new collaborators joined the group. Even if they are not directly implicated in the development of Tapiskwan approach of workshops, their work is fundamental to ensure the sustainability of the project in the long run.

**2. Participants of the workshops:** The workshops were open to the Atikamekw community – anyone could participate. Our focus, however, were accomplished artisans and young Atikamekw with interest and/or a natural aptitude for visual arts. Participants were recruited by Facebook (events were created and publicly

shared), posters and in person (the collaborators invited people to take part in the workshops). They took part in (1) the creative actions of the workshops, (2) the reflection about the results of the approach. During and after the workshops, they were interviewed to allow us to assess the results and make some adjustments in our methods.

We had different participants in each year because of circumstances beyond our control.

## **6.2. Qualitative research methods**

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation was the most important method to generate data in this study, for the simple reason that most of the time I was taking part in the discussions and in the activities with the participants. It is a method with roots in traditional ethnographic research, in which an observer takes part in the daily activities and interactions of people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture (Dewalt et al.1998). Being actively engaged in the lives of people brings the researcher closer to the perspectives held by studied populations. The primary method of recording participant observation data is field notes. “Field notes are accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner” (Emerson et al. 1995: 5). One important aspect about field notes is that “field notes are simultaneously data and analysis” (Dewalt et al. 1998). The field notes are constructed by the researcher, at the same time that they register the events they embed the researcher’s impressions of the events. I took notes of the interactions with participants as well as notes of the intuitions elicited by the interactions that could inform data interpretation and inspire new design proposals. I took notes of the main topics of my discussions with the collaborators.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to probe deep into the behaviors of the participants. In an interview, the researcher asks questions for the purpose of seeking answers directly related to the research (Bailey 2007; Spradley 2001).



Semi-structured interviews are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions that is called an interview-guide, but the questions are not necessarily asked in a specific order. It is the flow of the interview that determines when and how a question is asked (Bailey 2007). Other questions may also emerge from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006). Savoie-Zajc says (2009) that a semi-structured interview is an occasion in which interviewer and interviewee co-create meaning by reconstructing perceptions of events and experiences. The interviews of this study were audio recorded and partially transcribed (originally they were made in French).

**First cycle (2013):** In the first cycle of workshops, the participants were not individually interviewed. They took part in round tables to discuss their interests in working with traditional iconography, their satisfaction in taking part of the workshops and their suggestions. We consider this cycle as a pilot-activity.

**Second cycle (2014):** In the second cycle (in 2014), half of the participants were interviewed during the workshops and half of them at the end.

To all of them I asked questions about their plans for the future and their dreams. I asked about the motivations to take part in the workshops and their interests for crafts, visual arts and design. When did they start drawing or making crafts? I also asked questions about their knowledge about the symbols. What did they learn with the cultural steward? What are the symbols that they identify with?

To the participants that I interviewed in the middle of the workshops, I asked questions about what they were expecting to learn at the workshops.

To the participants that I interviewed at the end, I asked about what they learned, their satisfaction in taking part of the workshops and their suggestions for the next cycle. What did they appreciate the most in the workshops? What did they learn that could be useful in their lives? What are they planning to do with what they learned? Do their plans for the future include what they have learned in the workshops?

Initially I had planned to do one interview in the middle of the workshops and another at the end. However, I was facilitating the workshops and guiding the participants throughout the activities. Making individual interviews and conducting the workshops proved to be incompatible, as I did not have enough time to do both.

Nevertheless, the fact that I made interviews in two different moments allowed me to understand that individual interviews in the middle of the workshops were not only moments to collect data, those discussions enabled the participants to make sense of what they were learning, experiencing and creating. It was very clear that, after the interviews, the participants became more focused and motivated. Because our approach is very pragmatic and hands-on, individual interviews were moments to verbalize their impressions about what they learned and what they were creating, and to become more confident about their progression. Those were privileged reflexive moments.

**Third cycle (2015):** In the workshops of the summer 2015, I focused on guiding the practical activities. The interviews were made by another member of the design team, Solen Roth. She made two interviews during the workshops, one in the first week and another in the second week. In the first one, she asked about their motivations to take part in the workshops and their interests for crafts, visual arts and design. When did they start drawing or making crafts? They were asked about their expectations for the workshops: what did they want to learn? They were asked about their satisfaction in participating. What did they appreciate the most in the workshops? They were also asked about the meaning of the motif they had created and their inspirations.

In the second interview, they showed Lucie Leroux – a textile designer, who was teaching them printing techniques – the motifs that they had created during the previous week. She would give them technical advice about possible ways to print that motif. At the same time, they would be asked about their inspiration and the meaning of the symbols.

Two months after the workshops, in September 12-14th, I visited Wemotaci and La Tuque in order to interview four participants, the two mentors /coordinators and Christian Cocoo. I asked about their opinions about Tapiskwan workshops, their suggestions to improve the approach and their desire to continue to take part in the project. To the participants and mentors I asked: What did they appreciate the most in the workshops? What did they learn that could be useful in their lives? What are they planning to do with what they learned? Do their plans for the future include what they have learned in the workshops? I also asked their opinion and suggestions in regards to the possibility of establishing a printing studio in

Wemotaci – e.g., how it should work, for how many people, how many days and hours it should be open, how should the production be organized, etc.

### **6.3. The process**

A preliminary analysis of data occurred simultaneously to the action and data collection (Maxwell 2009; Miles & Huberman 2003). And so, observations and interviews were partially transcribed and I identified the key themes of each interaction immediately after the collection (Maxwell 2009; Miles & Huberman 2003). After these preliminary analyses, I frequently wrote memos. Maxwell (2009) states that memos allow the researcher to think about the relationships in the data and to make her ideas visible and retrievable.

In the memos, I synthesized the issues that emerged in each step of the project and articulated those issues with theories and concepts found in the literature, taking notes of ideas for future actions or activities. Sometimes, in those processes of synthesis, a clear proposal or conjuncture for an activity, action, and even a new project emerged. Those ideas and conjunctures were presented and discussed with Atikamekw collaborators as soon as I got the chance (a proposals for a future project was especially meaningful and is discussed in Chapter VII).

The goal of frequently discussing my conjectures with stakeholders was not to validate if my interpretations were right or wrong, but if they would be willing to act – to give their time and effort – to realize such proposals. I could estimate the value of my conjectures to Atikamekw stakeholders by their commitment to action. They would not waste their time for something that they did not regard as meaningful. Usually, when I proposed something valuable, they would make conjunctures themselves of other actions that they could take as a consequence. Their enthusiasm for the future repercussions of those proposals was my reference that I had found something meaningful. Therefore, those proposals would probably be included in the next cycle of the project.

At the end of the study, a deeper interpretation of results took place in order to extract the most important lessons learnt with the process in order to make recommendations for future interventions.

### **6.4 Limits of this study**

This study had several limits. The most obvious one is the distance between Montréal and the community of Wemotaci (409 km) – where most workshops took place and most of the collaborators and participants live – and the town of La Tuque (291 km) – where the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw is situated. Lodging in Wemotaci is very problematic (i.e., at this moment there are no temporary accommodations inside or near the community). Consequently, I could only visit the community a few times a year. Therefore, in-person discussions with the Atikamekw collaborators were sparse. Before the workshops, we would have several conversations by phone or Facebook.

Another limit is the difficulty of connecting with a community and building trust. This process takes time, from both ends. The community has to develop trust in us, therefore we need to show that we are reliable and we really care for the community. On the other hand, we need to find reliable collaborators. Unfortunately, our first local partner was not trustworthy – which jeopardized the continuity of the project. We were lucky to meet other people who believed in the importance of the Tapiskwan project and decided to collaborate.

Because Tapiskwan project is a collaboration of several people, what are the boundaries of this specific study? I decided to limit the scope of this study at the development of the strategy of design workshops, since I have contributed intensely to this particular outcome. However, I could have talked about the contributions from several other people who are part of the Collectif Tapiskwan, the overall project, who aim at using Atikamekw art as an instrument to encourage self-determination, identity assertion and well being in the communities.

About the workshops, they were conceived to encourage the participants' empowerment in the long run. I cannot, however, evaluate it in the limits of this PhD research. It would take several years to track the impact of the workshops on peoples' behaviors and choices, since evaluating empowerment is notoriously problematic (Alkire 2009; Alsop & Heinson 2005; Bartlett 2004; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Jupp & Ali 2012). I can assess their capacity to formulate achievable plans related to their art or their craft. How would the plans devised in the context of this study impact their capacity to act? This is something that I could not evaluate in the context of this research.

# Tapiskwan workshops

## TAPISKWAN 1.0 (2013)

July 26th to 31st — at Place du Parc in La Tuque



Wapan Boivin, Mathis Boivin, Christiane Biroté, Faith Boivin, Renata Marques Leitão, Kim Petiquay, Yvon Dubé, Jacques Newashish, Cédric Sportes, Anita P. Biroté, Michel Biroté, Anthony Dubé, Sasha Dubé, Christian Cocoo

**Facilitators:** Renata Marques Leitão  
Cédric Sportes

**Participants:** Anthony Dubé  
Sasha Dubé  
Kim Petiquay  
Wapan Boivin  
Faith Boivin  
Mathis Boivin  
Canouk Newashish

**Mentor:** Christiane Biroté

**Cultural steward:** Charles Cocoo

Participants, mentor and cultural steward were recruited by Yvon Dubé and Christian Cocoo

**Coordination:** Anne Marchand  
Christian Cocoo  
Yvon Dubé

**Visiting artists:** Jacques Newashish  
Anita Petiquay  
Michel Biroté  
(they were participants of the design workshops of 2011)

**Family ties:** Christiane is the mother of Wapan, Faith and Mathis. Kim is the mother of Sasha. Jacques is the father of Canouk. Michel is the brother of Christiane. Sasha is the nephew of Yvon.

## **General goals**

1. Pilot-activity: testing the interest of the participants and other Atikamekw stakeholders for this approach to workshops.
2. To conceive a collection of textile products – bandanas, tote bags and t-shirts – to be sold at the Powwow of Wemotaci. The products were screen-printed in Montréal.

## **Objectives**

### **1. To (re)discover the meaning and value of Atikamekw graphic heritage:**

- identifying essential elements of Atikamekw identity;
- identifying the essential features of Atikamekw visual language (style of representation and composition principles);
- learning the meaning of Atikamekw symbols from a cultural steward.

### **2. To discover the potential contemporary uses of Atikamekw graphic heritage:**

- becoming familiar with examples from other indigenous peoples;
- becoming familiar with contemporary uses of traditional graphic heritages;
- learning some notions of graphic and product design;
- conceiving products that could bring them some profit.

### **3. To Create contemporary products based on Atikamekw graphic heritage:**

- establishing collaboration between different generations;
- improving their ability to draw;
- understanding principles of visual composition;
- understanding principles and specification of screen-printing (costs, dimensions, number of colors);
- designing motifs to be printed on textile products.

## Day1 (July 26th)



### Activities

#### 1. Presentation of the goals of the workshops:

- to create a collection of textile products in 6 days.

#### 2. Presentation about contemporary uses of traditional iconography

- examples of products created by other indigenous cultures worldwide

#### 3. Observation of photos of traditional atikamekw objects

- photos from the archives of the CNA

#### 4. Introduction to drawing techniques



**Day 2** (July 27th)**Activities**

1. Charles Cocoo's presentation about Atikamekw symbolism
2. Discussion about the essential features of Atikamekw identity
3. Identification of the essential features of Atikamekw visual language

**Day3** (July 28th)



**Activities**

- 1. Presentation about different forms of representation**
  - abstract, figurative and naïf
- 2. Presentation about visual composition and patterns**
  - examples of products from several cultures
- 3. Choice of a symbol to be the basis of their collection**
  - (re)drawing and refining their symbol
- 4. Creation of patterns from the repetition of their symbol**

**Day 4** (July 29th)**Activities****1. Creation of motifs to be printed on two textile products**

- bandanda (mandatory), t-shirt or tote bag
- the motifs were created on paper and in black & white (afterwards they were scanned and sent to a printer in Montreal)

**2. Understanding the specifications for screen printing**

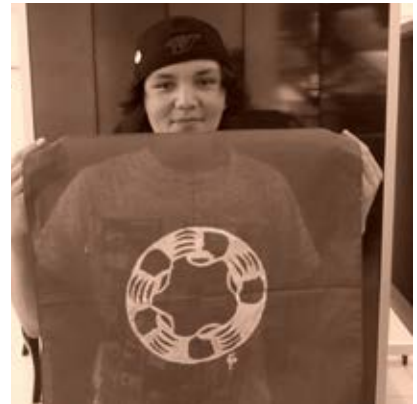
- e.g., printing area and number of colors

**Day 5** (July 30th)



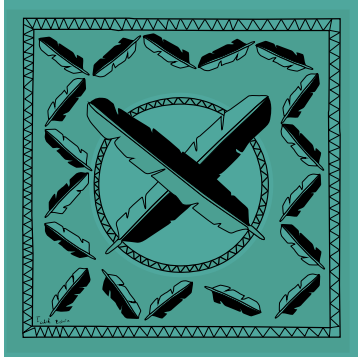
**Activities**

1. Creation of motifs to be printed on two textile products (continuation)
2. Production of prototypes

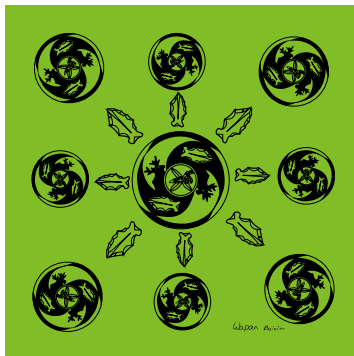
**Day 6** (July 31st)**Activities**

1. Finishing the prototypes
2. Presentation of the motifs and prototypes to the group
3. Discussion about the process

Faith Boivin



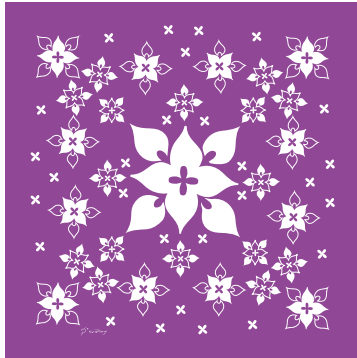
Wapan Boivin



Anthony Dubé



Kim Petiquay



Sasha Dubé



Christiane Biroté



Canouk Newashish



Mathis Boivin





### **Post-production problems**

The participants received no remuneration for their participation. They would receive the profits of the products they created (that were sold at the Powwow and at other venues). Nevertheless, because of problems concerning our commercial partner, the participants were not paid for the sales of their products. The design team was not responsible for the commercialization strategies, we were only responsible for the creation and production.

Even though we were not involved in this problem, the lack of recompense broke the trust between the participants and the design team.



## TAPISKWAN 2.0 (2014)

July 15th to 23rd — at Maison Aski in Wemotaci



Gabrielle Vachon-Laurent, Bryan Cocoo, Myrann Newashish, Helly-Anna Boivin, Patricia Biroté, Elsa Biroté Petiquay, Faith Boivin, Christiane Biroté, Mathis Boivin, Cédric Sportes, Renata Marques Leitão

**Facilitators:** Renata Marques Leitão  
Cédric Sportes

**Participants:** Myrann Newashish  
Gabrielle Vachon-Laurent  
Maryann Petiquay  
Bryan Cocoo  
Faith Boivin  
Mathis Boivin  
Helly-Anna Boivin (2 days)  
Patricia Biroté (3 days)  
Elsa Biroté Petiquay (4 days)

**Mentors:** Christiane Biroté  
Jacques Newashish (2 days)  
Éruoma Awashish (2 days)

**Cultural steward:** Charles Cocoo

**Coordination:** Anne Marchand  
Christian Cocoo

**Family ties:** Christiane is the mother of Faith and Mathis, sister of Patricia and aunt of Elsa. Bryan is the brother of Christian.

In the second cycle of workshops we aimed to deepen the discussion about identity and self-representation. We prepared several presentations and exercises, focusing on participants 18-35 years old. It was our first cycle of workshops within an Atikamekw community – Wemotaci – and we intended to invite some elders (master artisans) to present their art and discuss with the participants. But nothing happened as planned.

We had a huge problem of recruitment. First, we could not work with most of the participants of 2013 because of the remuneration problem. Second, our gatekeeper, who was supposed to recruit participants and elders, did not do anything. Me and Cedric Sportes arrived at Wemotaci and we had absolutely no one at the workshops.

The two mentors who live in Wemotaci, Christiane Biroté and Jacques Newashish, knocked door-to-door to invite people to participate. Christiane invite her family. Jacques contacted the Maison des Jeunes de Wemotaci (the Youth Center) and invited several teenagers. Dozens of youth passed by, but, as we asked them to commit to the activities for two weeks (starting at 9h30 AM), many gave up. Christiane Biroté was resolute in asking for a certain commitment, since she took the role of leader of Tapiskwan in Wemotaci.

Finally, we had a small group of participants, most of them very young (11-13 years). Because the content of our presentations and activities was not adapted to them, we had to improvise. Christiane was essential to the process of adapting the activities and “translating” them to the participants. The other two mentors, Jacques Newashish and Eruoma Awashish, were important to motivate the participants and develop some activities.

The participants and mentors conceived a collection of greeting cards. The cards were printed in Montréal (offset printing).

**Day1** (July 15th)



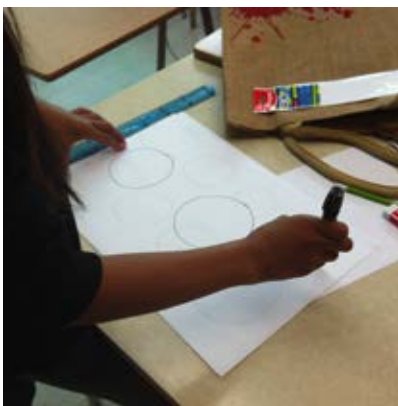
An empty room...



Finally we start



Drawing exercises with abstract forms



Christiane presents her work

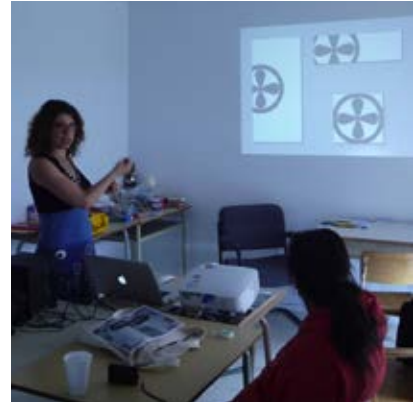


Drawing exercise based on Atikamekw iconography

**Day2** (July 16th)



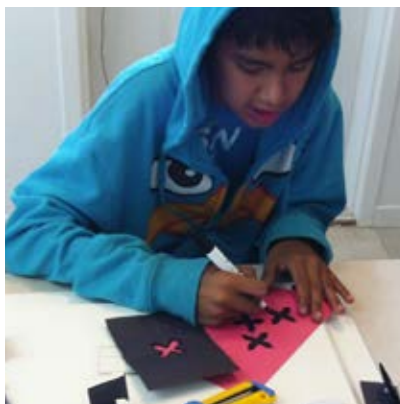
Charles Cocoo does a presentation about atikamekw symbolism



Presentation about principles of visual composition



Drawing / visual composition exercise based on Atikamekw iconography



Drawing / visual composition exercise: creating harmony and disorder

**Day3** (July 17th)



Photos of Atikamekw crafts



Christiane does a presentation about the six seasons



Graphic design exercise:



creating a greeting card inspired by Atikamekw seasons and elements of Atikamekw iconography



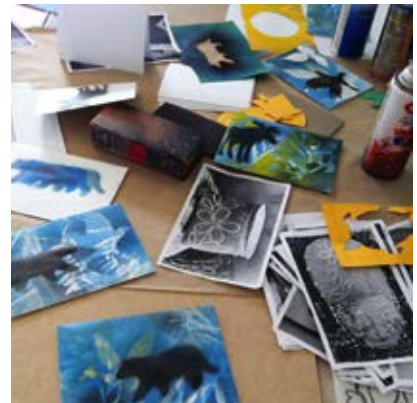
**Day4** (July 21st)



Éruoma presents her work

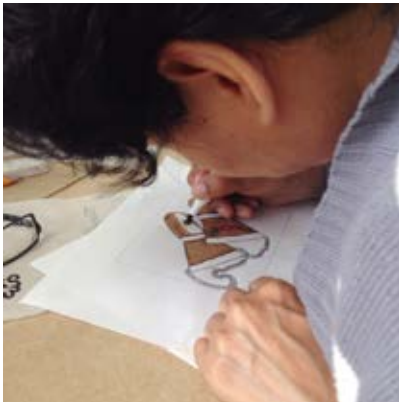


Jacques presents his work and develops a creative activity with the participants

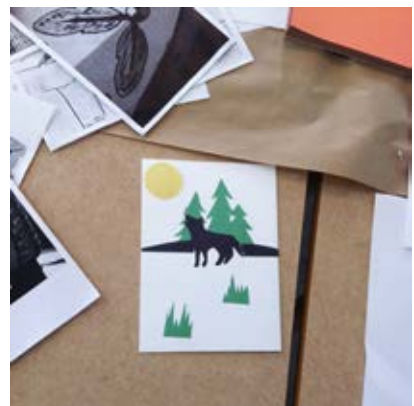
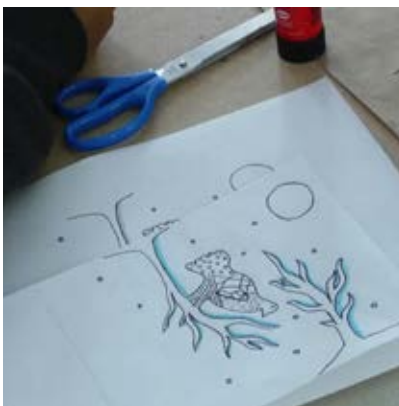


Creation of greeting cards

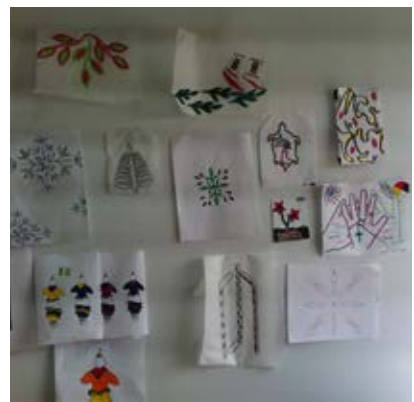
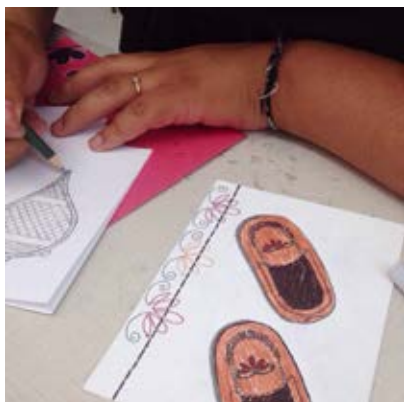
**Day5** (July 22nd)



Creation of greeting cards



**Day6** (July 23rd)



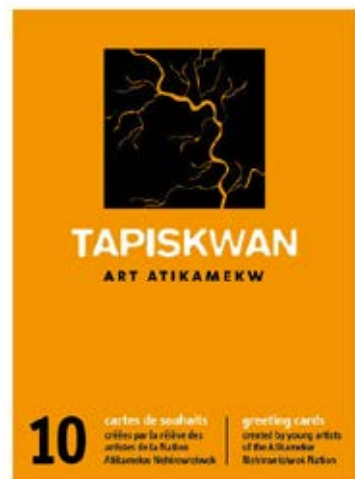
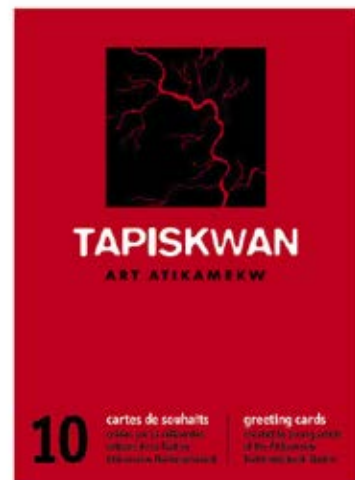
Creation of greeting cards



The greeting cards created by the participants and mentors were scanned and digitally retouched by me. The design team made a selection of 20 cards, which were organized in two sets of 10 cards each (a red label set and a yellow one – both labels designed by me). Behind each card, I put a text presenting the Atikamekw Nehirowisiwok Nation and the Tapiskwan project, the name and the photo of each artist.

We understood how important the commercialization phase is to the success of our activities. Therefore, after the workshops, in 2014, we started a partnership with an Atikamekw entrepreneur, Karina Awashish – founder of Coop Nitaskinan. Since 2014, this coop is responsible for the commercialization activities.







**TAPISKWAN**  
ART ATIKAMEKW

Nous sommes des membres de la Nation Atikamekw Nishrowitshewak, une des Premières Nations du Québec, Canada. Tapiskwan désigne la rivière Saint-Maurice, une grande artère au cœur de notre territoire.

C'est en hommage à cette richesse territoriale que nous avons nommé Tapiskwan ce projet visant la valorisation et diffusion de la culture Atikamekw Nishrowitshewak à travers différents médiums d'expression.

Dans cette collection de cartes de souhaits, des jeunes de la relève, accompagnés d'artistes accomplis, revisitent le patrimoine graphique de notre nation.



Maryam Petiquay

We are members of the Atikamekw Nishrowitshewak Nation, one of the First Nations in Quebec, Canada. Tapiskwan is our name for the Saint-Maurice River, a great artery at the heart of our territory.

We named this project Tapiskwan as an homage to this great territorial wealth. This project aims to promote and communicate the Atikamekw Nishrowitshewak culture through different media.

Guided by accomplished artists, youth revisit our nation's graphic heritage in this collection of greeting cards.

paper recyclé 100% / 100% post-consumer recycled paper

[www.tapiskwan.com](http://www.tapiskwan.com)



## TAPISKWAN 3.0 (2015)

July 14th to 19th at the Arena of Wemotaci / July 21st to 24th at the Club Odanak



Canouk Newashish, Kellyna Cocoo, Mathis Boivin, Dominic Boivin, Faith Boivin, Jeannette Boivin, Cédric Sportes, Solen Roth, Karine Awashish, Lucie Leroux, Clode Jalette, Jacques Newashish, Pascale Boivin, Renata Marques Leitão, Anne Marchand, Christiane Biroté, Noat Boivin

**Participants:** Faith Boivin  
Noat Boivin  
Dominic Boivin  
Kellyna Cocoo  
Jeannette Boivin  
Pascale Boivin  
Carole Ambroise  
Michel Biroté (1<sup>st</sup> week)  
Sylvestre Chilton (1<sup>st</sup> week)  
Canouk Newashish (2<sup>nd</sup> week)  
Mathis Boivin (2 days)

**Mentors:** Christiane Biroté  
Jacques Newashish  
Éruoma Awashish (3 days)

**Facilitators:** Renata Marques Leitão  
Cédric Sportes  
Solen Roth  
Lucie Leroux  
Karine Awashish

**Cultural stewards:** Charles Cocoo  
Christian Cocoo

**Coordination:** Anne Marchand  
Christian Cocoo

**Family ties:** Christiane and Dominic are the parents of Faith, Noat and Mathis. Christiane is the sister of Michel. Jeannette is the mother of Pascale and sister of Dominc. Jacques is the father of Canouk.

In 2015, we had two new members in the Tapiskwan team – Karine Awashish and Solen Roth, an anthropologist – what enriched our reflections and the planning of the activities. We refined our approach based on the lessons learned in the last two years:

**(a)** We added a phase of cultural immersion – two days in which cultural stewards present (in Atikamekw language) the history of their Nation, as well as the meaning and stories related to Atikamekw symbols. After the presentations, we open a space for discussions between the participants and mentors. **(b)** We enhanced the exercises of visual composition. **(c)** We included a training in artisanal printing, so Atikamekw artisans can print their products within in the communities.

The activities took place in Wemotaci (1st week) and at the Club Odanak, in La Tuque (2nd week). Club Odanak is a hunting resort, in the woods, that belongs to the Wemotaci Atikamekw Council (Conseil des Atikamekw de Wemotaci).

We had problems of recruitment again – what shows that we need to develop new strategies. We did not offer any remuneration, for instance.

**ATELIERS DE DESIGN**  
13-24 JUILLET  
À WEMOTACI **TAPISKWAN**

**Quoi ?**  
Les ateliers Tapiskwan offrent aux jeunes (18 ans et plus) une formation à la création d'images identitaires et de nouveaux produits inspirés du patrimoine atikamekw. Les participants seront aussi sensibilisés à la professionnalisation de leur pratique artistique et à la mise en marché de leurs créations.

**Quelles activités ?**  
Sérigraphie • motifs • immersion culturelle • design textile • design graphique • design de produits • dessin • composition • marketing • communication •

**1. Module formation :** centré sur les techniques de sérigraphie et d'impression textile (3 jours).  
**2. Module immersion culturelle :** centré sur le patrimoine atikamekw et les échanges entre jeunes, autres artisans et aînés (3 jours).  
**3. Module création :** centré sur les techniques de dessin et de composition, et la création de produits destinés à la mise en marché (5 jours).

**Mentorat compris...**  
... d'artistes reconnus : Jacques Newashish, Christiane Biroté, Guoma Awashish  
... d'entrepreneurs accomplis : Karine Awashish (organisme Tapiskwan)  
... de designers professionnels de l'Université de Montréal et de Centre Design & Impression Textile de Montréal

**Qui ?**  
Nous recherchons des jeunes atikamekw intéressés par les activités de création, les arts visuels, et le patrimoine culturel, et qui veulent explorer ces activités dans une perspective professionnelle.

Les ateliers Tapiskwan sont un établissement entre le Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw et l'École de Design de l'Université de Montréal

**Inscription gratuite**  
Frais de séjour compris.  
Nombre de places limitées.

**Contactez :**  
Karine Awashish  
@g.maL.com

Fin des inscriptions le 30 juin.

[www.tapiskwan.com](http://www.tapiskwan.com)

Poster used to recruit participants

At the beginning, we were aiming at participants between 18-35 years old, from the three communities. Two months before the workshops, we created a Facebook page and event and a poster, and Karine contacted many people. But we had just one participant that was recruited in advance: Kelynna Cocoo, who lives in La Tuque. Because of the difficulty in recruiting new participants, once more we had to make use of the personal relationships of our mentors (Jacques Newashish and Christiane Biroté). Most of the participants are part of Christiane's family and former in-law family.

The participants designed and printed a collection of textiles. The goals and guiding principles are described in chapters V and VI.

**Day1** (July 14th - in Wemotaci)



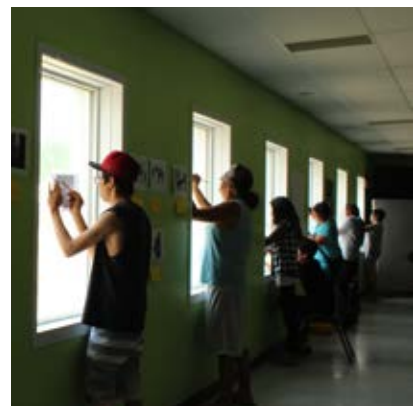
Presentation of the goals of the workshops



Christian Cocoo's presentation about Atikamekw history and symbolism



Discussion and notes about Christian's presentation



Drawing exercise



Drawing exercises based on Atikamekw traditional iconography

**Day2** (July 15th - in Wemotaci)



Charles Cocoo's presentation about Atikamekw symbolism



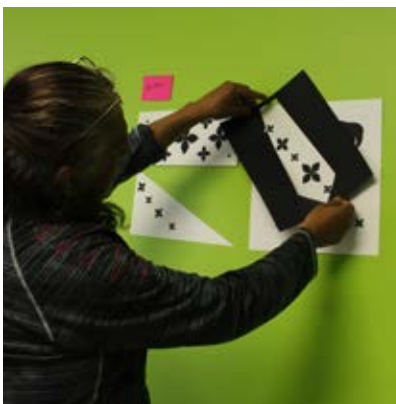
Jacques presents his work



and the use of symbols in his work



Composition exercise: everybody using the same 4 symbols



Composition exercise: creating a tie for the Grand Chief

**Day3** (July 16th - in Wemotaci)



Photos of Atikamekw crafts and inspirations



Creative activity:



designing a personal motif inspired by traditional symbols



**Day4** (July 17th - in Wemotaci)



Finishing the personal motif and framing its elements



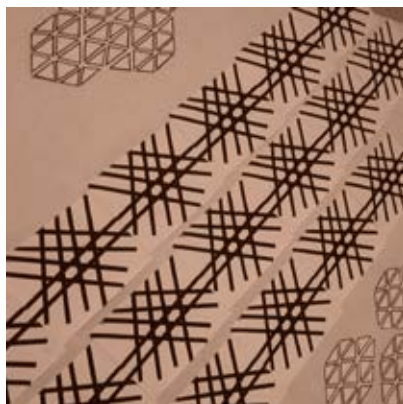
Pattern exercise: repeating the personal motif to create a pattern that could be printed on textiles



**Day5** (July 18th - in Wemotaci)



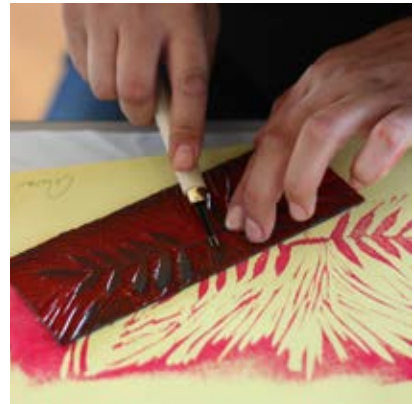
Finishing the patterns



Choosing colours

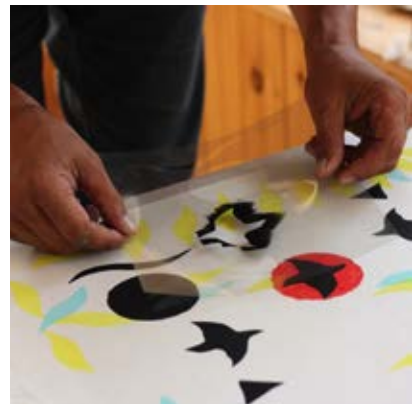
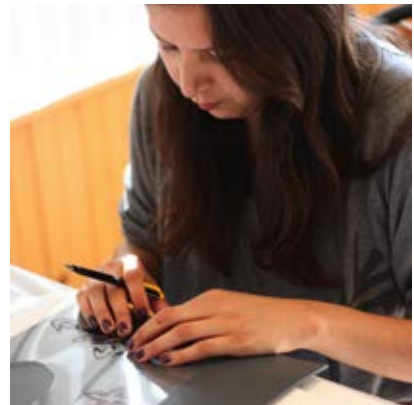


**Day6** (July 21st - at Club Odanak)



Learning silk-screen, block and stencil printing with Lucie Leroux

Preparing the blocks and stencils

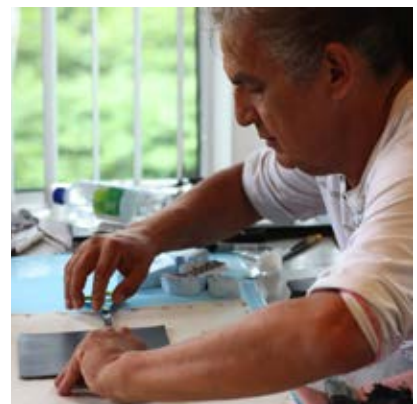


Starting to print

**Day7** (July 22nd - at Club Odanak)



Printing...



**Day8** (July 23rd - at Club Odanak)



And printing



Designing products

**Day9** (July 24th - at Club Odanak)

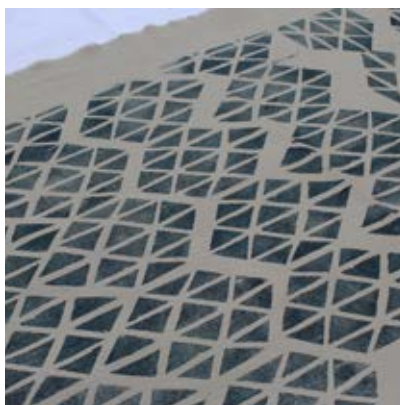
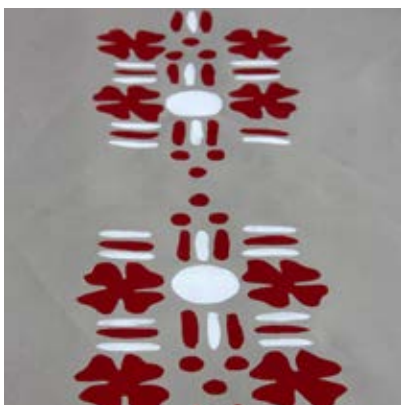


Sewing products and assembling notebooks



Farewell lunch

## Textiles and products







2

**Articles**





## **CHAPTER III**

# **Constructing a collaborative project between designers and native actors: an example of the collective articulation of issues**

Renata Marques Leitao, Anne Marchand & Cedric Sportes

## **ABSTRACT**

Social design and social innovation are receiving an increasing attention from the design community. We are still, however, striving to understand the roles a designer can play in a process of social innovation. In this self-reflective paper, we discuss and illustrate one of the roles that social design can assume in long-term collaborative projects. Di Salvo et al. (2011) suggest that designers might play a key role in providing the scope for social innovation by facilitating the collective articulation of issues. They argue that the collective articulation of issues is a foundational practice of social design, comprising an outcome and purpose in its own right. In this paper, we illustrate the proposition of Di Salvo et al. with the trajectory of our collaboration with Atikamekw stakeholders. The project started in 2011, with the ultimate goal of encouraging a virtuous circle among Atikamekw artisans. Throughout the last four years, we changed a great deal of our understanding about the nature of a social design action. Acting together through short projects, we have explored the specific features of the situation and revealed new opportunities of action. Finally, we understood that a main outcome of our actions was the collective articulation of the issue of how to create and nurture a virtuous circle.

## **KEYWORDS**

Social innovation. Collective articulation of issues. Social design.  
Native communities.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Victor and Sylvia Margolin once asked: “what role can a designer play in the collaborative process of social innovation?” (2002: 28). The worldwide design community has not yet formulated a definite answer, despite the increasing attention given to the fields of social design and social innovation and the desire to contribute to social change (Janzer & Weinstein 2014; Margolin 2007; Shea 2012).

Amid many possible roles that a designer can play in a process of social innovation, this paper will examine the one suggested by Di Salvo et al. (2011): **designers can facilitate and participate in the collective articulation of issues.**

In this paper, we illustrate the proposition of Di Salvo et al. — that the collective articulation of issues is a design practice in its own right — with the trajectory of our collaboration with Atikamekw stakeholders. Atikamekw Nehirowisiwok is one of the First Nations in Quebec, Canada. Our team of designers started to collaborate with Atikamekw artisans, artists and community leaders in 2011. Since then, we have changed a great deal of our understanding about the nature, the significance and the outcomes of a social design action.

## **2. SOCIAL DESIGN AND SOCIAL INNOVATION**

Social design can be defined, in its broadest sense, as the use of design to address social problems and to contribute to social change (Janzer & Weinstein 2014).

Social innovation refers to changes in the way we act to solve a problem or to generate new opportunities (Jégou & Manzini 2008).

In general terms, Manzini suggests that design for social innovation comprises “design initiatives geared toward making social innovation more probable, effective, long-lasting, and apt to spread” (2014: 65). But we still do not fully understand the possible roles for a designer as an agent of change, and what the possible contributions and outcomes of design for social innovation are. “As social design and social innovation gain ground as a kind of design, it is important for research to probe the practices and purposes of this work” (Di Salvo et al. 2011: 195). Since social innovation involves changes in the way people act, in many cases, these new approaches challenge some usual notions of the nature of the design activity and its purposes (Di Salvo et al. 2011; Janzen & Weinstein 2014).

The challenges to common notions about the nature of the design activity become even more visible in intercultural collaborative projects. Most indigenous cultures have not formulated the role of the designer, as we know in the Western world (Cross 2011; Margolin 2005). The concept ‘design’ came to existence within the modern worldview, as a means of rationalizing serial reproduction, and gained importance in the consumer society (Reijonen 2003). Therefore it may carry much western baggage with it, referring mainly to the conception of products and services for urban and global markets (Borges 2011; Willis 2003).

Nevertheless, several key design authors — such as Richard Buchanan (2001), Nigel Cross (1995) and Tony Fry (2009) — conceptualize design in a universal manner, as a form of intelligence or as an inherent ability that can be nurtured through education: the ability to create and change the conditions in which we live.

As human beings, we continuously create things that help reshape reality and essence of the world, as we know it. When we create new things — technologies, organizations, processes, environments, ways of thinking, or systems — we engage in design. To come up with an idea of what we think would be an ideal addition to the world, and to give real existence —form, structure, and shape — to that idea, is at the core of design as a human activity. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 1)

In this perspective, we can find the processes of design in each and every society (Kaine & Dubuc 2010; Margolin 2005; Orr 2002). Therefore, when we (western designers) work with indigenous communities, we should respect and recognize their own design ability, their ingeniousness, in order to avoid cultural imposition or disabling approaches.

Design work applied within the social realm must be collaborative, culturally relevant, socially applicable, and empowering rather than imposing and removed. Relevant stakeholders and communities must be given a highly regarded and considered voice, otherwise designers and their projects run the risk of being ineffective, at least and negatively impactful, at worst. (Janzer and Weinstein 2014: 329)

Design involves purposefully creating things in order to convert an actual situation into a preferred one (Schön 1983; Simon 1969). When we designers work with indigenous communities, we usually address a distressing social situation, as indigenous peoples all over the world suffer from high levels of poverty, oppression and discrimination (UN 2009). And we intend to encourage a virtuous circle within those communities.

There is a difference, however, between designing a product and redesigning a social situation in its complexity — as explained by Janzer and Weinstein (2014). Designing for social change involves conceiving and nurturing a long-term process that will rely on the collaboration of several and diverse social actors, working on different activities and events (Manzini 2014).

Working in collaboration with indigenous communities demands designers to develop a new set of abilities and to assume roles that are different from the traditional western designer. In this reflective paper, we discuss and illustrate one of the roles that social design can assume in long-term projects.

### **3. THE COLLECTIVE ARTICULATION OF ISSUES**

As designers, we act and create solutions to explore and understand the specificities of the problem and the situation that we want to change (Cross 1995; Schön 1983). Buchanan (1992) explains that there is a fundamental *indeterminacy* in design problems — i.e., the problem is never completely given — since the practice of design is to conceive and plan what does not yet exist. We conceive different solutions as a means to gain understanding of the problem.

To find the problem is thus the same thing as finding the solution. (...) The process of formulating the problem and of conceiving a solution (or re-solution) is identical, since every specification of the problem is a specification of the direction in which a treatment is considered. (Rittel & Webber 1984:137)

Therefore the construction of problems and articulation of issues are important components of every design process, which gain even more importance when applied to the realm of social design and social innovation.

Di Salvo et al. argue that the collective articulation of issues is a “foundational practice of social design and social innovation, comprising an outcome and purpose in its own right” (2011: 185). It means that the outcome of a collaborative design practice might not be a product or a service. The outcome might be a process of articulation that works to reveal the factors, relations and consequences of an issue in the social realm. They explain:

articulation can be understood as a process of discovery and invention: by understanding the articulation of a social phenomena or structure we can identify opportunities for interventions or setting new trajectories (Di Salvo et al. 2011: 187)

A process of social innovation necessarily entails the search for new solutions, new manners of acting, and new opportunities (Manzini 2014). DiSalvo et al suggest that we should consider the collective articulation of issues as a service provided through design to facilitate social innovation.

It is through the revealing of factors, relations and consequences of an issue that promising cases are identified and new directions for technical innovation are discovered. Our claim is that the articulation of issues thus provides base material for social innovation. Moreover, the *collective* articulation of issues adds an important component: it adds a character of openness and participation to the endeavor of social innovation. (Di Salvo et al. 2011: 187)

The collective articulation of issues becomes crucial when we work in long-term projects, in which the goal is to redesign a situation in its complexity, such as our collaboration with Atikamekw stakeholders that aims to revitalize Atikamekw craft practices and to encourage a virtuous circle in their communities.

#### **4. THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT**

Atikamekw is the First Nation whose ancestral territory corresponds to central Quebec, i.e., the St-Maurice river valley and its surroundings. Currently there are approximately 7,000 Atikamekw and close to 85% of them live in three reserves: the communities of Manawan, Opitciwan and Wemotaci. The Atikamekw have been known as “the bark people” because of their skill in crafting birch bark objects. Craft

has a major importance to Atikamekw cultural identity, as the denomination “bark people” shows. Their identity and particular ways of life have been constructed in relation to their territory, and craft is the material expression of this relation.

Atikamekw face two major (and interrelated) problems:

**(1)** Dependency on governmental aid and money transfers — translated in limited possibilities of socio-economic development and a very high rate of unemployment. This dependency can be exemplified by data from the community of Manawan (La Nation Atikamekw de Manawan [LNAM] 2006): unemployment rate reached 55.6% of the 15-24 year-old population (against 18.6% in the rest of Quebec), 70% of the jobs are in the public and para-public sectors; funds transferred from government represented 60% of the incomes.

**(2)** A deep identity crisis caused by the radical rupture with their traditional semi-nomadic way of life during the 20th century — translated in very high rates of suicide and violence, drug abuse and alcoholism (Awashish 2013). Atikamekw maintained a semi-nomadic way of life before the 1970s, when they began to live on a permanent basis in three ‘reserves’ (Poirier 2010). The reserves correspond to small portions of their ancestral territory, sharply contrasting with the amount of land that they occupied not so long ago (Poirier 2004). Assimilation policies, most noticeably the off-reserve residential school system, have deepened the transformations in their way of life.

In response to the crisis, Atikamekw are presently involved in the struggle for self-determination, identity reassertion and cultural revitalization (Jérôme 2010). Their struggle involves “reinterpreting their culture and devising new initiatives and strategies in the hope of taking their rightful place in today’s world” (Poirier 2004: 129).

As part of those initiatives, in 2011, the Council of the Atikamekw Nation (Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw - CNA) established a partnership in 2011 with the community-university research alliance *Design & Culture Matérielle*<sup>1</sup> [DCM]—

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1. DCM was established in 1992 with the goal of devising community development approaches for minority populations experiencing loss of identity, chiefly in Quebec and Brazil. DCM’s research work pursues the hypotheses that the skills and knowledge held by members of the community may become the driving force behind their growth, and that individuals may become the primary actors of their development, a process known as empowerment (Kaine, De-Coninck & Bellemare 2010).

of Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and Université de Montréal. Our design team<sup>2</sup> started to collaborate with the CNA in 2011, as a branch of this larger research alliance.

## 5. THE FIRST STEPS: DESIGN AND INNOVATION WORKSHOPS

The project started by listening to the members of the CNA. At first, our partners identified two main problems affecting Atikamekw craftspeople: (1) loss of cultural identity and (2) scarce supply of birch bark and moose skin — the two most important raw materials of Atikamekw craft. These two problems are inextricable, since the natural resources of the territory are central to their cultural identity.

Together, designers and Atikamekw stakeholders devised some courses of action to address these problems. Our collaboration focused on new training strategies to enhance Atikamekw artisans' capacity to innovate. And so, in the summer of 2011, our first joint action was an 8-week cycle of design workshops, with the participation of 10 artisans (craft masters and young apprentices). The main objectives of the workshops were: (1) to find alternatives to traditional materials based on new resources available on the territory; (2) to generate ideas for new products that communicate who they are today — their contemporary identity — to outsiders. Ultimately, the workshops aimed to contribute to the artisans' empowerment<sup>3</sup>.

Working together for eight weeks was a discovery process for designers and artisans. We were learning about each other — how we worked, what our priorities and values were<sup>4</sup>. But mainly, we were discovering together the particular features of our situation and promising opportunities for future actions. The main outcome of this cycle of workshops has been the identification of two kinds of challenges to the artisans' development, as well as the identification of opportunities to address these challenges:

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2. Directed by prof. Anne Marchand of Université de Montréal

3. The goals, methodology and outcomes of this cycle of workshops have already been examined in two papers (Marchand & Leitao 2012; 2014).

4. Our team is comprised of designers of diverse nationalities and backgrounds, which has enriched our exchanges.



### **5.1) Addressing the intergenerational divide**

The participants were divided in two distinct groups: the masters and the youth. The experienced artisans were not inclined to change the way they work or to use alternative materials (even if the traditional material is scarce). As designers, we had to recognize the limitations of our training, as we were working with people who had attained a great mastery in their art. In fact, we had a lot to learn with the accomplished artists about Atikamekw cultural practices.

In contrast, youth were open to experiment with different materials and techniques. On the other hand, they did not master the required know-how to carry on their cultural practices.

This understanding has inspired us to create another model of intergenerational workshops in which master artisans serve as guides to young apprentices. Both generations work together to create new products — the master artisans transmit traditional know-how to youth, which in turn contribute with their creativity and motivation to innovate. This model has been used in the following two cycles of workshops, in 2013 and 2014, with positive results.

### **5.2) Marketing opportunities and challenges**

Artisans and designers visited tourist stores in Quebec City, and talked to entrepreneurs in order to identify the opportunities and characteristics of the market for native crafts.

Accomplished artisans realized that the products they make belong to a high-end niche: they make use of scarce raw material as well as many hours of skilled work. In this context, consumers need to understand the meaning and value of the object to be willing to pay a fair price for it (Borges 2011). Few customers know about the Atikamekw culture. At issue here is how to present the Atikamekw culture to potential clients in order to increase its appreciation.

In this sense, we can argue that graphic design has an important role to play. The development of communication artifacts that present and identify the culture of origin might increase the appreciation of their cultural products (Hill 2011). At the same time, creating artifacts to convey their contemporary identity to outsiders might be a means of increasing their own appreciation of their cultural heritage (Blankenship 2005; Kaine 2004).

Furthermore, visiting tourist stores, the participants identified a promising niche market for their products: the mid-level, which none of Quebec's First Nations is currently exploiting. In this niche, consumers are looking for reasonably priced products that convey a sense of authenticity. But, since urban consumers have little information about the actual features of native cultures, what does this authenticity mean? Literature shows that, paradoxically, the "authentic" has to resemble the imagined portrayals constructed through the media, i.e., the perceived "authentic" is the stereotype (Cole 2007; Hunter 2011). Some authors argue that corresponding to the consumers' stereotypes can threaten to fossilize cultures as images from the past, impeding their creative evolution (Bousquet 2008; Hill 2011; Kaine et al. 2010; UNESCO 2009). Again, the challenge in marketing Atikamekw cultural products comprises conveying their actual cultural identity outsiders.

*How to conceive products to assert Atikamekw cultural identity and, at the same time, appeal to the consumers? Moreover, how can we conceive relatively affordable products for this niche in a manner that could encourage sustainable development in Atikamekw communities?* These questions were revealed and made visible in consequence of the actions taken by artisans and designers to address the initial problems identified by Atikamekw stakeholders. Our actions to transform the situation — and the exchanges about their consequences — allowed us to gain a better understanding of its complexity and underlying problems. Moreover, this process of articulation allowed us to identify new opportunities and devise new courses of actions, and that is essential to provide the scope for social innovation.

## **6. TAPISKWAN PROJECT: USING ATIKAMEKW VISUAL HERITAGE**

In trying to answer those questions, we devised another approach, named Tapiskwan<sup>5</sup>, which aims to promote and communicate the Atikamekw culture through different media. The Atikamekw have a tradition of engraving birch bark, which can be observed on their magnificent baskets and canoes. Their objects present a system of symbols that convey meaning and Atikamekw visual identity.

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5. Tapiskwan is the Atikamekw name for the Saint-Maurice River, a great artery at the heart of their ancestral territory. We named this project Tapiskwan as an homage to their territorial wealth.

Despite the scarcity of birch bark that hinders their craft practices, this iconography constitutes by itself a rich cultural heritage.

We realized that the issue of identity assertion could be addressed through a graphic design approach, in which traditional symbols would be used to 'brand' the Atikamekw Nation. The symbols of their traditional crafts could be documented, transposed to diverse media, and used to create new images and products that embody Atikamekw cultural identity. Therefore, we changed our main focus from finding alternatives to scarce materials to using traditional iconography for identity assertion.

The Tapiskwan project targets Atikamekw youth, which represent 60% of the Atikamekw population. They are the most affected by both the identity and the economic crisis, presenting the highest rates of suicide, drug addiction and unemployment (LNAME 2006).

Using this new approach we realized that we could work on many fronts in order to encourage and nurture a virtuous circle within Atikamekw communities:

**(1) The documentation of the traditional symbols, and their transposition to digital media, could contribute to the preservation of this cultural heritage.**

**(2) Graphic design workshops might provide young Atikamekw — who are talented and interested in visual arts — with a professional perspective as visual artists.** Currently, there are few professional perspectives in the reserves. A goal of the workshops is to show the participants that there is an increasing demand for visual communication. They could work within the reserve, or for global audiences, e.g., in the marketing of Atikamekw cultural products.

**(3) Using their symbols constantly and consistently to create images and products could allow urban publics to recognize the identity of the Atikamekw Nation.** In other words, to purposefully use their iconography to create new artifacts may contribute to make the Atikamekw Nation known by non-indigenous publics.

**(4) The use of traditional iconography to the creation of new objects might increase the appreciation of this cultural heritage by the Atikamekw themselves,** reinforcing their sense of identification with their symbols.

In the summer of 2013 we put in place our first cycle of creative workshops using traditional iconography. We were positively surprised by the interest demonstrated by the youth.

In 2014, after another cycle of workshops, we realized that we needed to integrate other local Atikamekw actors in our projects, such as entrepreneurs, storytellers and educators so that many diverse participants could give their particular contribution to the project of revitalizing Atikamekw craft practices and promoting socio-economic development within the communities.

Furthermore, we needed to integrate practitioners and researchers in the fields of anthropology, management, social economy and marketing in order to create a sustainable virtuous circle within the Atikamekw communities. Our goal became to organize a system of production of contemporary crafts that could foster and integrate the efforts of many different stakeholders in their particular expertise. At the same time, this system must respect and nurture Atikamekw cultural practices and social organization, resonating with their sense of identity.

Since then, the scope of Tapiskwan project has been amplified to become that which Manzini (2014) names "a framework project" —i.e., a larger project that coordinates, synergizes, and amplifies sequences of small-scale local initiatives.

## **7. A COLLABORATION BETWEEN DESIGNERS AND ATIKAMEKW STAKEHOLDERS**

Our ultimate goal has been to encourage a virtuous circle among Atikamekw artisans. We believe that a virtuous circle comprises socio-economic development, empowerment and self-determination. We agree with Manzini (2005) that interventions within local communities need to be enabling, that is, actions should enable people "to fulfill their potential, using their own skills and abilities in the best possible way to achieve their desired results". An enabling approach should thus consider people's values, aspirations, dreams, resources and abilities, and not only their needs and lacks. But one question remains: *how could we develop an enabling design approach to create a virtuous circle among Atikamekw artisans?*

This is a complex question that can generate a myriad of alternative solutions. In concert with Atikamekw stakeholders we devised some plans of action. Throughout the last four years we put some of them in practice. In each action, new factors of the issue — challenges, hindrances, resources and opportunities — have been revealed. In some moments, we experienced a certain frustration that the results of our actions had been mitigated by the factors we revealed. Every time we acted, even after extensive discussions with stakeholders, new elements of the problem appeared and pushed us to new directions. Finally, we understood that the main outcome of our actions was the very collective articulation of the issue of creating a virtuous circle.

Sometimes people believe that detailed and extensive planning might assure positive results in addressing a problem. But one of the central principles of design inquiry is that we cannot know all the features of a complex problem before we attempt to solve it (Buchanan 1992; Rittel & Webber 1984; Schön 1983). Nelson and Stolterman (2012) explain that the ‘solution’ to change an unsatisfactory situation cannot be found through analysis of the problem, regardless of how comprehensive the analysis is. The understanding of complex situations is only created by engaging actively with the specifics of the particular situation — understanding is gained through action — and this understanding, in return, reshapes our actions and their outcomes, which will reshape our understanding, and so on (Cross 2006; Nelson & Stolterman 2012). Schön (1983) names the design process as a reflexive conversation with the situation.

Acting together, designers and Atikamekw stakeholders, in many punctual design projects, we explored the specific features of the situation and revealed and created new opportunities of action — and that characterizes a process of social innovation.

In response to this conversation with the situation, the focus of the project changed from the raw materials to branding and identity assertion to the re-organization of the communities' productive system in order to allow the contribution of local actors. And this collective understanding can provide us a solid base for future actions.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we aimed to illustrate a process of collective articulation of issues with our ongoing project. In contrast with the examples used by DiSalvo et al. (2011), which were punctual design events, this paper shows a long-term commitment to social innovation within a community. In this sense, it constitutes a response to their claim that, ideally, a social design practice should be part of a broader social endeavor.

In light of our experience, we argue that the long-term collective articulation of issues is an ongoing learning process.

In this sense, our learning process becomes somewhat similar to a process of Participatory Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart 2008). We suggest that the study of the collective articulation of issues as a design practice would benefit in drawing knowledge from Action Research literature.

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## **CHAPTER IV**

# **Design and empowerment within indigenous communities: engaging with materiality**

Renata Marques Leitao & Anne Marchand

## **ABSTRACT**

Assimilation has drastically transformed the material life of numerous indigenous communities. This article argues that design practice might contribute to the empowerment of indigenous individuals and communities by enhancing their power to act upon and ultimately change the material circumstances in which they live. Design can be understood as an inherent capacity of humans to create and transform the material culture. We work with the definition of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (2001): empowerment is the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. We argue that choices are only truly "strategic" when they are linked to a project. Since the practice of design entails making projects and bringing them to material reality, the ability to make strategic life choices can be enhanced by design training and practice.

## **KEYWORDS**

Social design; empowerment; indigenous communities; design training; social innovation; self-determination; collaborative design

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a context where indigenous individuals and communities throughout the globe are redefining their place in the world and striving to forge a better life, this article argues that the practice of design can be a means to encourage their empowerment. But why empowerment? What kind of empowerment? And why design?

First and foremost, these two concepts — design and empowerment — refer essentially to a process of change. Here we are talking about a fundamental ability of human beings: our ability to create and change the material conditions in which we live — in our attempts to create the world that we long for (Bartlett 2004; Fry 2004; Nelson & Stolterman 2012). As Paulo Freire (2005) argues, to exist as humans is to *be able* to change the world. To **design** is one of the activities that allow us to transform our world in specific ways.

Design is the ability to imagine *that-which-does-not-yet-exist*, to make it appear in concrete form as a new, purposeful addition to the real world. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 12)

In other words, design refers to purposeful change. As for **empowerment**, it can be understood as a process of strengthening the capacity of marginalized people to shape their own destiny (Bartlett 2004). Empowerment is necessary when inequality in the distribution of power prevents individuals and social groups from being agents of their own development and making choices that are conducive to leading a good life (as they define it). Therefore, empowerment is what makes self-determination possible.

The change that is at the core of our study concerns the transformation of the material circumstances of indigenous communities who suffered assimilation. We understand that by talking collectively about “indigenous peoples and communities” we are talking about numerous distinct populations, who live in different contexts, with distinct cultures, lifestyles and experiences. The experiences of the two authors are related to Brazil and Quebec. The first author of this paper is Brazilian and researched a Brazilian traditional population – the Caiçaras<sup>1</sup> (Leitão 2011) – before starting to work in the context of the Quebec’s First Nations with the second author – who is French-Canadian. We are both designers who have been collaborating with members of the Atikamekw Nation<sup>2</sup> since 2011, in a project named Tapiskwan.

In spite of the vast differences, we acknowledge the key similarities between indigenous peoples: they share the legacy of colonization and the struggle for self-determination. Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that the term ‘indigenous peoples’ is an umbrella term that has

enabled the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena. (...) They share experiences as peoples who have been subjected to the colonization of their lands and cultures, and the denial of their sovereignty, by a colonizing society that has come to dominate and determine the shape and quality of their lives, even after it has formally pulled out. (Smith 1999: 7).

In the last few centuries, numerous indigenous communities were subjected to forced assimilation to the model of social life of the West. There are many ways to refer to this model: capitalism, modernity, (neo)liberalism, eurocentrism, development, and so on (Escobar 2015). In this paper we recognize that, although we can describe these processes using abstract concepts and models, colonialism and assimilation are lived by indigenous people as material and concrete circumstances.

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1. Caiçaras are considered by Brazilian law as a non-indigenous ‘traditional’ population, because of their mixed aboriginal and European descent. Brazilian government considers as indigenous only ‘pure’ populations, therefore they do not belong to either the settler or the indigenous societies. There are no reservations to protect their territory, even if they have a self-identification and an identification by others as belonging to a distinct culture. Although they are not legally an indigenous population, they correspond to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) definition of indigenous peoples, as being part of a network of people who struggle for self-determination, for recognition of the rights to their lands and to maintain a distinct culture and lifestyle.

2. The Atikamekw Nation is one of Quebec’s First Nations, whose ancestral territory is located in central Quebec, in the St-Maurice river valley and its surroundings.

Before European colonization, indigenous peoples lived in a world of their making. Their material life has been dramatically altered by the reality of assimilation policies and practices (Guindon 2015). The consequences of those transformations can be described in abstract terms such as poverty, dependency, discrimination and distress (Kirmayer, Tait & Simpson 2009; United Nations 2009) – but they are lived in material terms.

Self-determination can be understood as indigenous peoples' right to conceive well-being and development in their own way (Salazar 2009), instead of conforming to the Western model. This conception has to be translated into their everyday life practices (Salazar 2009). Self-determination is about being able to influence – and ultimately change – the material circumstances in which they live. The problem is that most of their immediate material circumstances are not of their choice, being imposed by outside institutions – a situation that requires a process of empowerment.

Empowerment has numerous different definitions. For the purposes of this paper – examining the links between self-determination and materiality – we adopted a definition proposed by social economist Naila Kabeer:

Empowerment ... refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. (Kabeer 2001: 19).

Kabeer's work focusses on women's empowerment in South Asia. Therefore, in the expression "*a context where this ability was denied to them*", she is referring to the condition of women in certain societies. But this expression can perfectly refer to the consequences of assimilation on indigenous societies.

Strategic life choices are critical for people to live the lives they want, constituting its defining parameters (Kabeer 2001). How can indigenous individuals and communities make strategic life choices under their current material circumstances? That is the reason why we combined Kabeer's conceptual framework with notions of design.

Design itself can be understood as the human talent – or capacity – to create and transform the material culture – i.e., design is about intentional action upon materiality. We argue that the ability to make strategic life choices can be enhanced by the practice of design. The practice of design is a practice of making projects and creating desired tangible outcomes through the application of focused intention. For that reason, we believe that we contribute to the empowerment of members of indigenous communities by nurturing their inherent capacity to design.

## 2. EMPOWERMENT

Broadly, empowerment can be understood as “a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives” (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009: 19). Since the late 1980s, the concept of empowerment has become prominent in the rhetoric of development and fight for social justice (Jupp & Ali 2010; Luttrell & Quiroz 2009). Although there is a general agreement about the potential contribution of empowerment strategies for strengthening community development and promoting social justice, no single definition has been widely accepted (Hennink et al. 2012). The term has been ascribed to a wide variety of definitions and meanings in various socio-economic and political contexts (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Jupp & Ali 2010).

To some, empowerment is a political concept that involves a collective struggle against oppressive social relations. To others, it refers to the consciousness of individuals and the power to express and act on one's desires. (Luttrell & Quiroz 2009: 2)

Luttrell and Quiroz (2009) argue that at the root of the different points of view is the debate on whether change is brought about or constrained by forces beyond peoples' control — *structures* — or through individual and collective action — *agency*. Some conceptions of empowerment put emphasis on *agency*, while others on *structure* (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007). None of them is the panacea. Therefore, in order to promote substantive social and material changes, we need to combine different perspectives. In this paper, we present our perspective of the concept ‘empowerment’, while acknowledging that many approaches can be pertinent and valuable in the context of indigenous peoples.

### 2.1. Agency and structure

*Agency* is defined by Amartya Sen (1999) as what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values they regard as important. In short, **agency refers to the capacity for purposive action** (Gammage et al. 2016: 6).

*Structures* have been conceptualized by Giddens (1984) as the distribution of rules and resources in a society. In this sense, it denotes inequalities that affect entire social groups. The term ‘structure’ refers to the social forces (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, norms, etc.) that limit or influence the opportunities available to individuals and groups (Luttrell & Quiroz 2009).



Agency and structures are complementary and dynamic forces (Giddens 1984). “Structures shape the agency of individuals and groups, but the agency exercised by individuals and groups in turn shapes structures, reproducing, modifying, or transforming them. (Gammage et al. 2016: 1).

Nevertheless, some conceptions of empowerment emphasize *agency*, focusing on autonomy, self-confidence, self-worth, mobilization, participation (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Le Bossé 2003). The pitfall of those approaches is overlooking the fact that the fruitful exercise of agency requires a change in ‘the rules of the game’ – that is, in the material and institutional conditions (Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Jupp & Ali 2010; Luttrell & Quiroz 2009).

On the other hand, some conceptions of empowerment emphasize *structure*, usually focusing on political demands for recognition and equality of rights (Luttrell & Quiroz 2009). However, overemphasizing institutional and political aspects may have the side effect of discouraging individual and collective agency. In other words, even if the ‘rules of the game’ are changed, for people to be able to take advantage of the opportunities open to them, they need to be able to act purposefully – and that entails self-confidence and autonomy (Freire 2005; Ibrahim & Alkire 2007; Taylor 1994).

Moreover, in the case of populations who suffered harsh assimilation processes, they are surrounded by immediate material conditions that they did not choose. Conditions that, even after political and institutional changes, tend to remain. For instance, the Caicarás – in Guaraqueçaba, Brazil – have been thrown into the money economy in the 1990s (Leitao 2011). The Atikamekw, in Quebec, live in reserves where they cannot practice most of their cultural practices. Many of them live in overcrowded houses that are unfit for their lifestyle.

Therefore, individual and collective empowerment entails the capacity to act purposefully upon the immediate material conditions – that which Donald Schön (1983) names ‘the materials of a situation’. In this sense, avoiding to see materiality as a determinant force (Guindon 2015). We chose to work with Kabeer’s conceptualization of empowerment because it allows us to consider agency and the materials of a situation at the same time, and to articulate them with main notions related to design activity.

## 2.2 Naila Kabeer's theoretical approach

Empowerment ... refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. (Kabeer 2001: 19).

Kabeer (2001) understands that the notion of empowerment is bound up with the condition of disempowerment, because it entails a process of change.

People who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not empowered in the sense in which I am using the word, because they were never disempowered in the first place. (Kabeer 2001: 19)

Since not every choice is relevant to a process of empowerment, Kabeer (2012) qualifies the notion of *choice* in four different ways:

**a) The possibility of having chosen otherwise.** For choice to be meaningful there has to be *alternatives* (Kabeer 2012). It is important to make a distinction between choices made from the vantage point of real alternatives and choices that reflect their absence or the fear of negative consequences of choosing something different than the norm (Kabeer 2001).

**b) The perception of alternatives.** "To what extent is it possible for disempowered actors to conceive of having chosen or acted differently?" (Kabeer 2012: 218). One of the main effects of disempowerment is that it prevents "people from even considering that there can be an alternative to the situation they are in" (Luttrell & Quiroz 2009: 13).

**c) The consequences of choice for the structures of inequality that prevail within a society.** To what extent do the choices in question undermine, and even transform, these structures, and to what extent do they merely reproduce them? (Kabeer 2012: 218).

**d) The distinction between trivial and significant choices.** *Strategic life choices* are critical for people to live the lives they want, constituting their defining parameters (Kabeer 2001). We make *trivial choices* on a mundane basis every day of our lives, *strategic life choices*, on the other hand, have profound consequences for the quality and direction of the lives we are able to lead.

## Dimensions of empowerment

Kabeer (2001) conceptualizes three interrelated dimensions of empowerment: *resources*, *agency*; and *achievements*. Changes in each dimension build on, contribute to and benefit from changes in the others (Gammage et al. 2016).

**(1) Resources** form the conditions under which choices are made (Kabeer 2001). She refers not only to material resources, but also to the social and human resources that might serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice.

Human resources are embodied in the individual and encompass his or her knowledge, skills, creativity, imagination and so on. Social resources, on the other hand, are made up of the claims, obligations and expectations which inhere in the relationships, networks and connections which prevail in different spheres of life and which enable people to improve their situation and life chances beyond what would be possible through their individual efforts alone (Kabeer 2001: 20)

For Kabeer, “the terms on which people gain access to resources are as important as the resources themselves when the issue of empowerment is being considered” (2001: 20). Frequently the problem of poverty in local communities is framed by governments and institutions as a lack of material resources, being dealt with through transfers of funds and other resources – e.g., computers, books, equipment, information. Nevertheless, unilateral transfer of resources has often resulted in deepening the dependency of communities that receive aid (Eade 2007; Srinivasan 2012; UNESCO 2009). Therefore, access to resources may be *provided* on clientelist and disabling forms of dependency relationships or may be *achieved* in ways that offer dignity and an enhanced sense of self-worth. (Kabeer 2001).

**(2) Agency** is at the heart of the process by which choices are made. For Kabeer (2001), agency is the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them. She explains that agency is much more than outward action, encompassing “the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency” (2001: 21).

“Resources and agency, together constitute what Sen refers to as **capabilities**, the potential that people have for living the lives they want” (Kabeer 2001: 21). ‘Potential’ is the word to be stressed here. In a process of empowerment, this potential has to be realized in concrete changes in the conditions under which people are living – enabling them to take more control over their lives (Bartlett 2004).

**(3) Achievements** are the outcomes of choices. To achieve entails translating agency and resources into tangible outcomes. Kabeer (2001) argues that a fundamental manifestation of disempowerment is the failure to achieve. An empowered group has an increased capacity to convert choices, resources and agency into tangible outcomes (in comparison to a disempowered one).

In this conception, empowerment entails being able to purposefully change the material conditions in which we live, an ability that we can name as *design*.

### 3. DESIGN

Design can be defined as a natural and inherent capacity of humans to purposefully create things that help us create and change our world (Buchanan 2001; Fry 2009; Manzini 2015).

As human beings, we continuously create things that help reshape reality and the essence of the world as we know it. When we create new things – technologies, organizations, processes, environments, ways of thinking, or systems – we engage in design. (...) To come up with an idea of what we think would be an ideal addition to the world, and to give real existence – form, structure, and shape – to that idea, is at the core of design as a human activity. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 1)

Design is about the creation of that which Herbert Simon (1969) named the artificial world. For Simon, humans have strived to control the natural world by creating the artificial world – i.e., by designing tools and artifacts – including buildings, services, policies, social institutions and symbol systems. This is one of the most ancient human activities, beginning “over 2,5 million years ago when *Homo habilis* manufactured the first tools” (Friedman & Stolterman 2015: vii).

Simon was the first to propose a science of design, a science about the human ability to create the artificial world, but we can find references to this human activity in the work of several other authors, such as Hanna Arendt.

In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. (Arendt 1958: 9)

Paulo Freire probably was not aware of the term ‘design’ in 1968 – when he wrote “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed” – but he was surely referring to that which has been conceptualized as ‘design’:

It is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods— tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas, and concepts. Through their continuing praxis, men and women simultaneously create history and become historical-social beings. (1970: 101)

And we continuously create artificial things in striving to flourish, to achieve that which we imagine is a good life. Design is the form of intelligence – or capacity – that we engage to bring the intangible (ideals, desires, aspirations) into the tangible (reality).

Several design authors (Cross 1995; Fry 2009; Manzini 2015; Nelson & Stolterman 2012) claim that all human beings are designers, since we all possess this capacity or intelligence. That said, as any human talent, to be usable it must be cultivated through practice (Fry 2009; Manzini 2015). Fry (2009) explains that the proficient exercise of any practice actually depends on it becoming part of the being of the person who employs it. Acquiring a practice takes time and compliancy – i.e., training, repetition, reflection and correction (idem). Acquiring design practice means a change in the being of the practitioner, in which the activity of design becomes embodied in the individual. Design experts are the individuals who develop their talent to design.

And what means to acquire design practice? It entails learning how to “**think and act by projects**” (Manzini 2015: 68). We argue that members of indigenous communities have a lot to gain from developing their inherent capacity to design.

### **3.1. Features of design activity**

Design involves purposefully imagining and bringing into existence things in order to convert an existing situation into a preferred one (Simon 1969). Therefore, something has to bother or distress us in the first place. This dissatisfaction triggers the desire to create something that could change the situation. How can we act in a situation that calls for change? Nelson and Stolterman (2012) argue that change can be initiated in basically two ways: (1) people can take action to escape from situations they do not like, or (2) they can take action to move toward what they

believe is more desirable. Design actions refer to the latter: change as an outcome of intention and purpose.

### **Intention**

Intention plays a pivotal role in planning for the future. It is noticeable that the first documented uses of the word “design” in the English language – in the 1500s – refer “to conceive and plan out in the mind; to have as a specific purpose; to devise for a specific function or end” (Friedman & Stolterman 2015: viii).

Intention, as Michael Bratman (1987) argues, involves a commitment to act. He conceives intentions as elements in coordinating larger plans, stating that “the ability to settle in advance on such plans enables us to achieve complex goals we would not otherwise be able to achieve” (Bratman 1984: 379-80). Intention is what guides our actions and choices, giving them an **aim**. This idea is not new, as it was already present in the philosophic discourse of the Middle Ages:

At that time, the idea of aim, as in aiming an arrow, became central to the unfolding meaning of intention. That is, that intention is not the target, not the outcome, not the purpose, nor an end state, but is principally the process of choosing or giving direction to effort. (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 112)

This process of choosing and giving direction to effort – aiming at a desirable state of things – is essential to our discussion about empowerment.

### **Imagination**

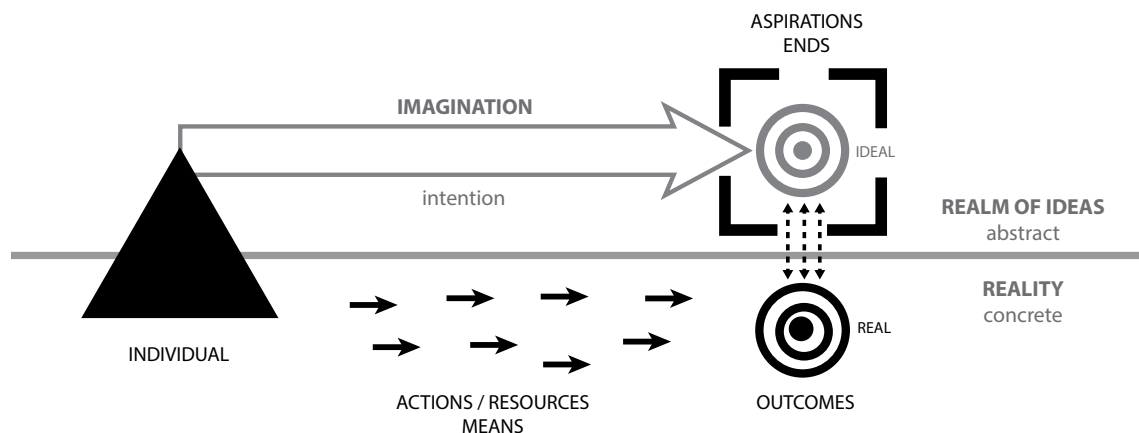
“In order to create something, one must have the ability to imagine what that something is and how it can be made real” (Nelson & Stolterman 2012: 128). And here a fundamental component of design ability works: imagination.

We can understand imagination as the capacity “to envision things that are not present in the physical world that surrounds us” (Folkman 2010: 1). For Folkman (2014), imagination is related to the enabling and stimulation of possibilities – transforming what is known into what is possible. Envisioning that which does not (yet) exist enables us to strive to bring it to existence.

The concept of imagination can be used to describe something that is not given, per se, but that exists as possibility, and that nevertheless still has a present effect as, created in the minds of people, it guides their behavior, ideas, and orientation in the world. (Folkman 2014: 7)

### The ideal and the real

Every project has two stages: envisioning and realizing (Boutinet 2010). Design is not only about imagining ideal outcomes, it also concerns imagining the means and acting to make it real (Nelson & Stolterman 2012). Striving to bring the imagined outcome to reality mobilizes resources and concrete actions, setting in motion the process of intentional change.



**FIGURE 1** shows a snapshot of the design process described in this article. The frame of aspirations is shaped by the values and norms of a social group. Inside this frame, the intention to change the existing situation generates ideas about that which is desirable (the ideal). Therefore imagination is brought about by intention. At the same time, the image of the ideal becomes a target to the process of aiming and planning our concrete actions. Thus, envisioning a target (ideal outcome) reinforces our intentions. With an image/target in mind, resources and actions are mobilized to manifest the ideal in the real world. Individuals belong to both realms: they produce abstract ideas of aspirations and images of desired outcomes but, in order to produce tangible outcomes, their action must take place in the real world.

How is the ideal brought into the real? Schön (1983) considers design as a reflexive conversation with the materials of a situation – in other words, it is a conversation between ideals and reality. That is, it is a dialogue, not a monologue. Our intentions and ideals do not override reality, on the contrary. We are not able to completely change the reality as we wish. Reality is something that resists our actions, something that is much more complex than we can comprehend (Boutinet 2010).

Inspired Tim Ingold (2009) – who stated that making is weaving – we propose that design can be also seen as a process of weaving. We weave our intentions and visions with the materials of the reality, creating the tapestry of our designed world.

Typically, complex problems that call for change have more variables than can be fully understood by any human being.<sup>3</sup> Attempts to be comprehensive in such situations can lead to paralysis (Nelson & Stolterman 2012). We can never find the perfect solution for those problems – no matter how much time we spend analyzing their elements and discussing them with stakeholders. It is only through the process of creating and testing conjectured solutions, actively engaging with the situation, that we gain understanding (Cross 1995; Schön 1983). A conjectured solution starts the conversation with the materials of the situation – it “breaks the ice”, so to speak.

Schön argues that, because of the complexity of the situation, designers’ actions “tend, happily or unhappily, to produce consequences other than those intended” (1983: 79). In other words, designers act and the situation “talks back”, forcing them to reflect: to restructure their understanding, to reframe the problem, and to generate another conjectured solution.

### **3.2. Design, agency and structure**

In design, the interaction between agency and structure is conceptualized as a continual and intentional dialogue. The material reality always resists, in a certain degree, our intentions and talks back. As result, the back-talks of the situation force us to deepen our understanding and to refine our choices. Ultimately, our honed agency should produce tangible outcomes, which are never exactly that which was imagined at the beginning of the design process – when a dissatisfaction triggered the desire for change. This conversation is part of the endless process of engaging with materiality and reshaping it in our attempts to create the world that we long for – something that is always an unfinished business.

Oppressive structures limit the choices of indigenous people and hinder the influence of their actions upon material circumstances. In other words, most of the materials of the situation are not of their choice. Moreover, often those materials seem incompatible with their ways of life, values, aspirations and sense of identity. It is easy in such situations to be dominated by frustration and fatalism – manifestations of disempowerment. As Paulo Freire (1970) argues, the oppressed

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3. This kind of problem is known in design as *wicked problems* (Buchanan 1992; Rittel & Webber 1984)



becomes convinced that their circumstances are unalterable, with the exception of the interventions by the ruling classes.

Freire suggests that the oppressed “must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging” (1970: 85). And here lies the importance of honing the design ability: learning to act upon materiality as it is here and now.

In a design mode, people are not trying to reach the perfect and encompassing solution from the start (what could lead to frustration). On the contrary, design mode entails exploring creatively the situation in a dialogue, in a weaving process. In this sense, they are **infusing the materials of the situation with their creative power**.

### **3.3. Projects and strategic choices**

For Kabeer (2001), empowerment refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices, which are critical for people to live the lives they want. Therefore, those choices concern the direction of one’s life.

We argue that **strategic life choices are necessarily linked to a project**: a life project, an identity project, a societal project. *The-life-one-wants* has to be envisioned in order to guide his or her choices. If people do not have a project of a desirable situation, no choice can be “strategic” in Kabeer’s sense. As argued by Boutinet, “pas de possibilité de passer directement à un travail de réalisation, s’il n’y a pas eu auparavant un détour par un travail de conception qui l’a précédé” (2010: 65).

**The practice of design is a practice of making projects and creating desired outcomes through the application of focused intention.**

### **3.4. Perceived alternatives and design**

Kabeer (2001) wonders: *to what extent is it possible for disempowered actors to conceive of having chosen or acted differently?*

As already stated, disempowerment prevents people from even considering that there can be an alternative to the situation they are in (Luttrell & Quiroz 2009). Since they are unable to recognize or conceive alternatives, they might have

aspirations for a fulfilling life, but these aspirations take form of wishful thinking instead of producing attainable plans for the future (Appadurai 2004).

How can their capacity to make projects and plans be rekindled? We suggest that the first step is nurturing their imagination. People need not only to envision a future life beyond the limiting structures, but also the means of its realization (Steen 2013). At issue here is how to create spaces and situations where imagination can be nurtured. We argue that we can nurture stakeholders' imagination by training their image-making skills (e.g., drawing, photography, graphic design and video) and using design methods.

Considering that a process of change usually unfolds amid a relationship between several actors, the ability to communicate images of that-which-is-not-yet is essential in the process of collective imagination. Visions of possible outcomes must be shared among stakeholders in order to catalyze community reflection, build consensus and, finally, mobilize collective action. In this sense, **abilities related to image-making can fuel action-oriented imagination, and especially, collective imagination.**

Design methods (such as brainstorming, prototyping and mind mapping), which transform abstract ideas into something visible and tangible, can catalyze collective reflection and visions for the future, and enable stakeholders to realize many previously hidden alternatives. Using these methods, designers structure their ideas, share them with others, and explore their feasibility, viability and possible consequences – i.e., moving back and forth from abstract to concrete thinking. Thinking concretely – helped by the materiality of a prototype – points the limits of the initial idea, forcing us to return to abstract thinking, thus refining our ideas in order to align intentions, actions and resources with the possible outcomes (Sanders & Stappers 2014). This is a training of the ability to create and materialize desirable outcomes that can guide strategic life choices.

### **3.5. Collaborative design**

Those characteristics of design activity become more relevant when we wish to create solutions for chronic problems that affect entire communities – such as dependency and chronic poverty in indigenous communities. For Ezio Manzini,

those seemingly intractable problems ask for a process of social innovation, that can be defined as:

a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), the aim of which is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way. (Manzini 2014: 57)

In other words, social innovation creates solutions that break from standard points of view and propose new ways of looking at the issue. There are a growing number of initiatives worldwide in which many social actors get together to change concrete situations. Manzini explains that these groups of people who have developed new ideas about how to solve problems had to:

(1) (re)discover the power of cooperation; (2) recombine, in a creative way, already existing products, services, places, knowledge, skills, and traditions; and (3) count on their own resources, without waiting for a general change in the politics, in the economy, or in the institutional and infrastructural assets of the system. (Manzini 2014: 12)

In the last decades, several alliances have been formed between expert designers and local stakeholders with the goal of producing social innovation in collaborative processes. Many alliances, however, do not facilitate people's empowerment. Sometimes designers focus on creating a product or service to "help" a poor community instead of forming a long-term collaboration (Janzer & Weinstein 2014). Even if this approach might create beneficial products and services, empowerment cannot be attained if one group gives resources while the other only receives them.

In long-term collaborative processes, people are seen as assets, contributing to the process with their own knowledge and skills. Design experts work to support and enhance the capacity of stakeholders to design and make their own projects happen. "The role of design experts is to feed and support these individual and collective projects – and thus the social changes they may give rise to" (Manzini 2015: 1). The ultimate goal is therefore to increase the stakeholders' autonomy to a point where they become independent of the designers. This is why these stakeholders' empowerment is so crucial to the success of such collaborations.

At issue here is how we can conduct a design training that facilitates the participants' empowerment.

### 3.6 Empowerment and design training

When we talk about training, we are essentially talking about education. We searched for inspiration in Paulo Freire's emancipatory approach for adult literacy. For Freire (2005, 1996), education is always a political act, used to maintain the status quo or to generate change. He argues that one of the means by which education can maintain the status quo is by invalidating the knowledge of the oppressed – in this paper, the oppressed are indigenous peoples. One of the most effective means of their oppression is the belief in the superiority of Western knowledge (Smith 1999).

Freire (1970) was critical of what he called **banking education**, wherein learners are mere receivers of “valid” knowledge — and asked to silently absorb the information transmitted by the teacher. “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they developed the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire 1970:73).

Instead, Freire (2005) proposes a **problem-posing education**, conceived as a partnership between teacher and student to investigate themes that are meaningful to the student's everyday life. In this thematic investigation, students not only develop new skills and acquire knowledge, but they become aware of the circumstances that surround them and develop the capacity to express their ideas and to act upon the world in order to transform it.

Design training in indigenous communities can follow the models of a *banking education* when the teacher believes that design is a capacity that only design experts, trained in Eurocentric schools, possess. Therefore, in this perspective, designers hold expertise that the indigenous people lack. This approach is deemed to be disabling, contributing to increase the passivity of the students and their dependency on outsiders (Filho 2013; Manzini 2015; Toomey 2011). Those unequal relationships do not recognize local communities' assets – their skills, knowledge, creativity, etc.

On the other hand, design educators can adopt a *problem-posing approach*. In this case, we consider that design is a natural, inherent and universal human ability that can be nurtured – and so students develop a talent they already have. The focus changes from providing students with what they lack to cultivating what they have. Manzini (2005) argues that an enabling design approach should enable

people to fulfill their potential using their resources. In collaborative workshops, designers transfer design methods and skills to the participants. For that reason, we suggest dedicating a great deal of energy and time in revealing and recognizing the participants' assets – valuing who they are, what they have and what they can do.

#### **4. ILLUSTRATING A DESIGN APPROACH: TAPISKWAN WORKSHOPS**

We – the two authors of this article and a design team of Université de Montréal – have been collaborating with Atikamekw stakeholders since 2011, in a participatory action research project named Tapiskwan. The main focus of this collaboration has been to develop new training strategies to encourage innovation among Atikamekw artisans and youth. And so, most of our activities have consisted in conceiving and giving design workshops in Atikamekw communities.

To illustrate our discussion about design and empowerment, in this last section, we share some guiding principles of our workshops and how they relate to the dimensions of empowerment described by Kabeer: agency, resources, and achievements.

##### **4.1. Design & Agency**

*Agency* can be understood as the capacity for purposive action (Gammage et al. 2016: 6). Kabeer (2001) explains that agency encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their activity and also reflection and action – notions that are at the core of design activity. Thus, we argue that design is itself a form of agency.

In the workshops, we enhance the participants' talent to design (and consequently their agency) by challenging them. We work for one or two weeks towards a precise and challenging goal. The challenge consists in short-term design projects that have to be accomplished with limited time and resources.

Paulo Freire states that *problem-posing* education must be challenging:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge.

(...) Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (Freire 1970: 81)

The facilitators (expert designers) are not there to provide the answers to the participants' problems. On the contrary, they are challenging the participants to explore the problem and create a solution. And at the same time, to discover how skillful, talented and knowledgeable they can be. The use of limited external resources forces the participants to recognize the resources they already have at hand. Foreign elements (e.g., drawing, visual composition and printing techniques) are gradually introduced to help the participants create the responses to the challenge. This approach aims to enhance their motivation and confidence in their ability to act.

## **4.2. Design & resources**

Empowerment and problem-posing education are not about a simple transfer of resources (e.g., information, knowledge or technology) from the teachers to the students. As Kabeer states, "empowerment entails a change in the terms on which resources are acquired as much as an increase in access to resources" (2001: 20).

In Tapiskwan workshops, we work with a precious resource: Atikamekw graphic heritage (their ancestral iconography). A main goal of the workshops is to lead the participants to (re)discover its value, meaning and possible uses.

A common strategy used in design workshops that aim to revitalize traditional crafts through the use of local iconography is to make an inventory of the symbols of a community and give it to the artisans. The problem with this strategy is that – even using an endogenous resource, the local iconography – the inventory is made by outsiders who provide it as a response to the local artisans' problems. In this approach, there is not a change in the terms on which resources are acquired. In other words, the knowledge from outsiders is still valued over local knowledge.

On the other hand, in the Tapiskwan workshops, the discovery of the meaning and value of Atikamekw graphic heritage is made through exchanges between

cultural stewards, elders, artists, artisans and youth. We dedicate two days for intergenerational exchanges – that are held in Atikamekw language –, creating a space where different generations use the ancestral symbols to share their stories and to reconnect with the history of their people. As a result, the traditional symbols are used to facilitate intergenerational dialogue. Here, not only the symbolic and graphic resources of the Atikamekw Nation are mobilized and activated, but also the human resources of different generations and the social resources of the group. As Manzini (2014; 2015) argues, social innovation is about the creative recombination of existing assets. In our workshops, we combine design training with elements of their everyday life and their cultural heritage. In other words, we encourage people to use their past inheritance (e.g., their skills, stories, know-how, symbols) in innovative ways – merging tradition, external influences and creativity – linking the past of their culture with their projects.

### **4.3. Design & achievements**

We argue that design workshops held in disempowered indigenous communities are essentially exercising the participants' capacity to achieve – converting choices, actions and resources into tangible outcomes. Specific short-term design projects – that we propose in the workshops – serve as a small-scale experience in which the participants establish a concrete goal, a project, and act to materialize it. In this process, they recognize their own resources: skills, creativity, cultural heritage, material and human resources available in the community, etc. At the end of the workshops, they have to produce tangible outcomes. The concrete outcomes provide the participants with feedback, so that they can reflect on the results of their choices and actions. They can compare their initial intention, their development and their final result.

At the beginning of our collaboration with Atikamekw artisans, in 2011, we held a cycle of workshops, in which we worked for eight weeks on some ambitious and overarching goals (Marchand & Leitao 2014). We realized afterwards that small short-term projects have more impact on the participants' empowerment because the circuit of establishing a goal, realizing a project, reflecting upon the results, and identifying future opportunities is shorter. Therefore, a sequence of small-scale projects becomes the basis for reflection and discussion about the future.

In the workshops, we hope to enhance the participants' confidence in their ability to act and accomplish projects, so that they can define and put in practice their own life projects in their everyday life.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we adopted a notion of empowerment related to the capacity to shape the material conditions in which one live. An empowered individual or collectivity develops the capacity to make projects and plans, envisioning a future situation and mobilizing their resources to make their project happen. This form of empowerment enables individuals and communities to work with material circumstances as they are here and now – not waiting for eventual changes from above. And since design is the practice of making and realizing projects, we believe that we contribute to the empowerment of members of indigenous communities by nurturing their capacity to design through practice and training.

We also worked with the notion that design is a natural, inherent and universal human talent (or capacity, ability, form of intelligence). It is about planning the future and intentionally acting upon materiality in the attempts to create the world that we long for. The capacity is named design, and the discipline that studies this capacity is also named design.

Initially, however, the term 'design' was not conceptualized in this broad and universal manner. Disciplines and professions are not created in a vacuum, on the contrary, they emerge under specific historical contexts. For instance, anthropology arose as the study of the "exotic Other", in the context of European colonization (Velho 2002). Likewise, design arose as a career path with the advent of the Industrial Revolution – as a means to rationalize serial reproduction – and gained importance with the emergence of consumer society (Kaine & Dubuc 2010; Reijonen 2004). Therefore, design is a term deeply linked with modernity and industrial reproduction (Willis 2004). More recently, several design researchers started to consider that design corresponds to the activity that creates material culture in each and every society (Cross 2011; Fry 2009; Kaine 2002; Manzini 2015; Orr 2002; Papanek 1984; Nelson & Stolterman 2012).



Rather than considering design to be a product of industrialization, we need to think more broadly about the conception and planning of material and visual culture. This enables us to find design in all cultures while at the same time comparing the different conceptions of design and the ways of organizing design practice. (Margolin 2005:239)

Because of its close ties with modernity, design, as a profession or as an academic discipline, does not have a tradition of research in indigenous contexts and collaboration with indigenous peoples. This paper suggests a potentially useful framework for social designers who aim to collaborate with Indigenous peoples and for indigenous collectivities who aim to transform material circumstances by forming alliances with designers.

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## **CHAPTER V**

# **Tapiskwan Project: A Design Approach to Foster Empowerment among Atikamekw Artisans**

Renata Marques Leitão, Cédric Sportes,  
Anne Marchand & Solen Roth

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents Tapiskwan, a project focused on developing design workshops for indigenous artisans that aim to encourage their empowerment by bridging tradition and innovation. Developed in partnership with members of the Atikamekw First Nation (Québec, Canada), this approach to design workshops is the result of a long-term commitment to community-based social innovation. Our design team has been collaborating with artisans, artists and community leaders since 2011 to address the challenge of producing crafts as a source of socio-economic development. Our main activity has been the organization of intergenerational workshops to create contemporary products based on Atikamekw traditional iconography. Over the last four years, we developed an approach that motivates the participants and enhances their creativity, self-confidence and autonomy, and, at the same time, increases the participants' appreciation of their cultural heritage. This paper describes Tapiskwan's guiding principles, which could inspire similar initiatives within other indigenous communities. We suggest that such projects should be conceived as processes of collective discovery, in which designers and artisans learn together the challenges, opportunities and resources available, therefore aligning the intentions of several different stakeholders to the creation of a common vision.

## **KEYWORDS**

Design Workshops, Empowerment, Indigenous Communities, Social Design, Cultural Processes



## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper presents Tapiskwan, a project focused on developing design workshops for indigenous artisans of the Atikamekw Nation. The project aims to bridge tradition and innovation and to stimulate community members' empowerment. The Atikamekw Nehirowisiw Nation is one of the First Nations in Quebec, Canada. Our design team has been collaborating with Atikamekw artisans, artists, and community leaders since 2011 to address the challenge of producing crafts as a source of socio-economic development.

Poor local and indigenous communities throughout the globe are striving to forge a better life. They frequently see the market of cultural goods as a means to promote socio-economic development. The Atikamekw are no different. The Nation faces serious socio-economic problems. In response to this crisis, Atikamekw leadership decided to foster craftsmanship as a means to generate income within its communities, to promote collective entrepreneurship, and to revitalize Atikamekw cultural practices.

Indigenous artisans in the contemporary world face numerous challenges – such as scarcity of raw materials and having to reach markets that they do not fully understand. In order to overcome those challenges, artisans frequently establish alliances with expert designers. The goal of such projects is often to produce marketable goods in order to generate income for poor communities, and their products are aimed at the global market. One negative effect of this kind of collaborations is the creation of a dependency on external expert input (Thomas 2006). Another risk is that the products convey the designers' ideas – and preconceptions – about those indigenous

cultures instead of being rooted in their cultural identity. In other words, in those cases the production of handicrafts reinforces established stereotypes, instead of being a vehicle for a community to represent and assert their cultural identity.

The Tapiskwan project, on the other hand, aims to encourage artisans' self-representation, autonomy and empowerment. We agree with Manzini (2005) that interventions within local communities should enable people "to fulfill their potential, using their own skills and abilities in the best possible way to achieve their desired results". Therefore we seek to support the ability of Atikamekw stakeholders to design for themselves, using their own resources.

Indigenous communities have a highly precious asset: their cultural heritage. Tapiskwan focuses specifically on the potential of ancestral iconography. The Atikamekw have a tradition of engraving birch bark, which can be observed on their magnificent baskets and canoes. The symbols engraved on their traditional crafts have conveyed stories across several generations and this iconography constitutes in and of itself a rich cultural resource. Tapiskwan seeks to foster productive connections between the past and the future by revisiting this ancestral iconography through the development of contemporary products.

Over the last four years, we developed an approach to workshops that aims to enhance the Atikamekw artisans' creativity, motivation and self-confidence, and at the same time, increase their appreciation of their own cultural heritage. In the Tapiskwan workshops, we combine design training with an immersion in the participants' cultural heritage. An essential aspect of our approach is to foster collaborations between Atikamekw youth and elders in order to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and the renewal of cultural practices. In other words, we encourage the participants to use their inheritance (their skills, know-how, symbols) in innovative ways – merging tradition, external influences and creativity – linking the past of their culture with projects for the future.

In this article, we present the trajectory of our project, the guiding principles of the Tapiskwan approach, and an example of our approach put in practice.

## 2. CONTEXT

Our design team of Université de Montréal has been collaborating with Atikamekw artisans, artists and community leaders since 2011. The Atikamekw are one of the ten First Nations whose traditional territories are located in the Province of Québec, Canada. Currently close to 85% of the Atikamekw population lives in three reserves: the communities of Manawan, Opitciwan and Wemotaci.

They have been known as “the people of the bark” because of their skill in crafting birch bark objects. Their identity and particular ways of life have been constructed in relation to their territory, and craft was the material expression of this relation. However, the Atikamekw have seen their territory change drastically over the last century due to railways and hydroelectric dams, as well as intensive natural resource exploitation by non-Atikamekw entities (Jérôme 2010).

Traditionally a semi-nomadic people, the Atikamekw society was severely disrupted in the 1970s when the creation of reserves meant having to settle on a tiny portion of their ancestral territory (Poirier 2004). This resulted in a much denser and sedentary population, thereby imposing drastic reformulations of Atikamekw ways of life. Furthermore, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the government sent a generation of children to Residential Schools located far away from their home, where they were forbidden to speak their native tongue and to carry on their cultural and spiritual practices (Jérôme 2010; Poirier 2010). The residential schools system “created a breach in the local processes of handing down knowledge, skills, and practices to younger generations” (Poirier 2004: 135). Consequently, they were faced with a diminishing body of knowledge and skills (Poirier 2010).

Today, Atikamekw face serious social problems – such as very high rates of suicide, violence, drug abuse and alcoholism –, and a very challenging socio-economic reality, with particularly low levels of income, education, and employment (Statistics Canada 2011, 2006). Over 70% of the population of more than 18 years of age does not hold a recognized degree, and approximately 50% of this age group is considered “inactive”. Furthermore, a large proportion of each family’s income comes from social welfare.

In response to this crisis, the Atikamekw are presently involved in the struggle for self-determination, identity reassertion and cultural revitalization (Jérôme 2010).

As part of those initiatives, in 2011, the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw<sup>1</sup> (CNA) [Council of the Atikamekw Nation] decided to foster craftsmanship as a means to generate income within the communities, to promote collective entrepreneurship, and to revitalize and renew Atikamekw cultural practices.

Craft has a major importance to Atikamekw cultural identity, as demonstrated by the denomination “people of the bark”. Nowadays there are many active artisans within the communities, showing that craftsmanship is still a significant cultural practice. However, most of them belong to the generation that was raised in the residential schools. That generation – with a few exceptions – have found it very difficult to partake in the process of intergenerational transmission. Therefore, many youth have not learnt the skills and knowledge that are related to their land and to craftsmanship. In this context, revitalizing crafts practices might be a means to bridge Atikamekw roots with the future of the Nation (Marchand et al. 2017).

Even though the intergenerational transmission of craft skills and knowledge is crucial, artisans in the contemporary world also need to develop a different set of skills. In Eastern Canada, there are very few cases of successful businesses producing and selling Indigenous handicrafts. In 2011, in order to address the challenge of producing Atikamekw crafts as part of a viable contemporary practice, the CNA established a partnership with the *Design & Culture Matérielle* research group<sup>2</sup>. Our collaboration has been focused on the development of training strategies to enhance Atikamekw artisans' capacity to design and innovate.

### 3. ATIKAMEKW WICKED PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

One characteristic of design activity is dealing with “wicked problems” – i.e., problems that are unique and inherently ill-defined – by adopting a solution-focusing strategy (Cross 1995; Rittel 1972). Those problems cannot be solved through the

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1. Founded in 1982, the CNA provides all three Atikamekw communities with administration, education, and culture services.

2. We started to collaborate with the CNA as part of the community-university research alliance *Design & Culture Matérielle* of Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and Université de Montréal. At the beginning, our collaborative project was a branch of this larger research alliance. The Design team of Université de Montréal is composed of graphic designers, product designers and an anthropologist.

linear model of problem solving, which consists of problem definition followed by problem resolution (Buchanan 1992). Instead, designers adopt a strategy based on generating and testing conjectured solutions as a way of gaining understanding of the problem (Cross 1995). That is, knowledge about the nature of the problem is developed through testing conjectured solutions.

It was through a cycle of workshops and several follow-up actions that we developed a clearer understanding of the complexity of the challenges Atikamekw artisans face (Leitao, Marchand & Sportes 2015). In other words, we had to act and try to solve the problems in order to start understanding them.

### **3.1. Initial problems / First cycle of workshops (2011)**

At the beginning of the collaboration, our partners identified two main problems affecting Atikamekw artisans: loss of cultural identity and scarce supply of birch bark and moose hide – the two most important raw materials of Atikamekw craft. It is noticeable that these two problems are inextricable, since the natural resources of the territory constitute the core of their cultural identity.

We tried to address those problems in our first cycle of workshops, in the summer of 2011. The main goals of these workshops were: (1) to find alternatives to traditional materials based on new resources available on the territory, or using less scarce materials; (2) to generate ideas for new products that communicate who the Atikamekw are today – their contemporary identity – to outsiders. In addition, as one of the activities of the workshops, Atikamekw artisans visited tourist stores in Quebec City, and talked to craft dealers and Aboriginal entrepreneurs to identify the opportunities and characteristics of the market for native crafts.

Essentially, the main outcome of these workshops was the collective identification of challenges and hindrances to the artisans' development – e.g., lack of motivation, changes in ways of life, intergenerational divide, finding niche markets for cultural products, asserting their cultural identity. Over the years, follow-up actions and exchanges with experienced artists, youth and cultural stewards allowed us to deepen our understanding about the problems Atikamekw artisans face. A common vision of existing challenges and opportunities emerged through our joint activities, and this process eventually led us to devise the Tapiskwan project.

### 3.2. Challenge: Social welfare / Lack of motivation

The Atikamekw are a Canadian indigenous people, which differentiates this case from most designers-artisans collaborations, that take place in Third World contexts. Numerous designers-artisans projects focus on producing marketable goods and aim for the global market. The goal, in those cases, is income generation to alleviate poverty. Therefore, local communities' lack of material resources is seen as the central problem. This approach, however, does not consider the deeper features of poverty. The Atikamekw context invites us to see the problem from another perspective. Canadian First Nations communities depend heavily on government subsidies and programs for indigenous peoples – that is, social welfare. Therefore Canadian institutions have framed the problem of poverty in Indigenous communities as a lack of material resources, and that has not improved their socioeconomic conditions.

A negative effect of the dependency on governmental aid is inaction. Atikamekw artisans have little motivation to sell their production since they are afraid of losing the social welfare. They are allowed to sell only small quantities that is, if they exceed a certain amount of income the government cuts their financial support. Social welfare corresponds to an amount that is enough to survive, but not to thrive – in other words, they remain poor with little perspective of improving their quality of life.

*How is it possible to generate socio-economic development through the production of crafts if the artisans have little motivation to market their production?*

We understood that the main goal of our workshops was not the production of marketable goods. We had to move our focus from the products to the individuals and their motivations. We had to investigate the significance of producing material culture – the significance of making – in order to motivate the participants to act.

In the context of a designer-artisan alliance, design cannot be seen merely as the activity that conceives marketable goods. Design is about agency – that is, it is the action and ability of creating things that might have an impact in the world. In this sense, we believe that the design training put forward in the workshops should focus on enhancing the participants' agency, autonomy and self-confidence.

### 3.3. Challenge: changes in ways of life

As semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers, the Atikamekw used to have a very active way of life. A distinguishing feature of Atikamekw culture is the division of the year into six seasons. Each season corresponds to a state of the land, to the availability of resources and thus to specific activities (Poirier 2004).



**IMAGE 1:** Semi-nomadic way of life – a winter camp; snowshoe making; hunting. Source: Serge Jauvin collection / Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw.

The Atikamekw faced a radical rupture with their traditional way of life in the 1970s, when they began living on a permanent basis on the reserves that had been established for them (Poirier 2004; 2010). The construction of reserves was part of a series of assimilation policies that aimed to “modernize” Canadian indigenous populations. Since then, the meaning of manufacturing objects has completely changed. In the forest, craftsmanship was essential to their survival in their land and climate conditions. Within the reserves, producing their traditional objects is



**IMAGE 2:** Reserves: Manawan (in the 1970's) and Wemotaci. Source: Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw.

not crucial to their livelihood anymore. For example, making snowshoes used to be crucial to their survival during the winter. Today, however, Atikamekw use pick-up trucks and buy food in the grocery store. Manufacturing objects has become either a means to reconnect with the past, or the production of decorative handicrafts.

*With these drastic changes in their ways of life, what does it mean to be Atikamekw today?* Youth – raised within the reserve – are the most affected by both identity and economic crisis. They present the highest rates of suicide, drug addiction and unemployment. Currently, there are few professional perspectives on the reserves. At the same time, it is difficult for the new generation to find a medium for their expression in the traditional crafts, due to the scarce supply of raw materials and their lack of skills and know-how related to the land.

Moreover, studies show that traditional know-how tends to disappear when youth are unable to associate them with real professional perspectives (Leite 2005). The younger generations often are not interested in mastering a demanding craft when they do not see the possibility of benefits, other than preserving the family tradition. In this situation, a concrete project might mobilize some aspects of their cultural heritage (such as traditional iconography), allowing these aspects to be revealed and recognized as important assets. In the long run, we believe that Tapiskwan workshops will provide young Atikamekw with a professional perspective as designers or visual artists, which will allow them to take part in the process of redefining and asserting Atikamekw contemporary identity.

### **3.4. Challenges: intergenerational divide**

In the 2011 workshops we noticed that the participants were divided in two distinct groups: the masters and youth. The experienced artisans were not very inclined to change the way they work or to use new materials. As designers, we needed to recognize some limitations of our training, as we were working with people who had attained a great mastery in their art. In contrast, youth are open to innovation. At the same time, they had not mastered the required know-how to carry on their cultural practices.

In the traditional way of life, the transmission of knowledge between elders and youth used to take place during the activities for subsistence conducted in the



forest. On the reserve, the different generations do not have many opportunities to work together, share their knowledge, tell their stories, and so on. We observed that this lack of spaces and opportunities to collaborate has weakened the bond between the generations.

*We realized that “being together” – that is, finding circumstances in which people can work together, collaborate and have fun – is an important intrinsic motivation factor.* It is in this context that Tapiskwan was directed toward the development of intergenerational workshops designed to favor knowledge sharing and re-appropriation of Atikamekw cultural practices through creative activities.

### **3.5. Challenge: marketing cultural products**

On visiting tourist stores, accomplished artisans realized that the products they make belong to a high-end market: their creations require the use of scarce raw material as well as many hours of skilled work. In this context, consumers need to understand the meaning and value of the object to be willing to pay a fair price for it (Borges 2011). Furthermore, few non-native people know about Atikamekw culture, and therefore few of them understand the value of these artisans' works. We were able to identify a promising niche market, which is currently not being exploited by Quebec First Nations. In this mid-level niche, consumers are looking for reasonably priced products that convey a sense of authenticity. But, since urban consumers have little information about the actual features of local indigenous cultures, what does this authenticity mean? Often that which tourists accept as 'authentic' has to resemble the imagined portrayals constructed through the media, i.e., the 'authentic' is what conforms to the stereotypes (Cole 2007; Wang 1999). Therefore, the challenge in marketing cultural products comprises conveying actual Atikamekw cultural identity to consumers.

*How can cultural products be marketed in a way that effectively conveys Atikamekw identity to consumers?*

The development of images that present and identify the culture of origin is directly related to the appreciation and perceived value of crafted products, and, consequently, to indigenous artisans' economic development (Borges 2011; Hill 2011; Lima 2010).

#### 4. TAPISKWAN PROJECT: SYMBOLS AS VEHICLES FOR ACTION

To address the above-mentioned challenges, we devised another approach, named Tapiskwan<sup>3</sup>. As mentioned earlier, Atikamekw have a tradition of engraving birch bark, which can be observed on their magnificent baskets and canoes. The symbols engraved on their traditional crafts have conveyed stories across several generations and the identity of the family who made the object. That system of symbols and adornments conveys meaning and elements of identity that are specific to the Atikamekw. Despite the scarcity of birch bark that hinders their craft practices, this iconography constitutes by itself a rich cultural heritage. This heritage was found to be in and of itself a resource that could be exploited in new ways, using techniques and technologies that circumvent the issue of increasingly unavailable materials. The symbols of their traditional crafts could be documented, transposed to diverse media, and used to create new images and products that embody Atikamekw cultural identity.



**IMAGE 3:** Birch bark baskets. Source: McCord Museum.

Atikamekw iconography was therefore identified as a powerful vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, identity assertion, and economic development. This project seeks to revisit traditional symbols to create new products and images that embody Atikamekw cultural identity. In this sense, symbols become vehicles for action, bridging the past heritage with their aspirations for the future.

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3. Tapiskwan is the Atikamekw name for the Saint-Maurice River, a great artery at the heart of their ancestral territory.

## 5. TAPISKWAN WORKSHOPS: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Tapiskwan workshops foster productive connections between the past and the future (1) by revisiting ancestral Atikamekw iconography through the creation of contemporary products; (2) by creating a space in which different generations can work together and share their knowledge and skills; (3) by developing agency and self-confidence through design training. We have developed this approach throughout three years of workshops –2013, 2014 and 2015<sup>4</sup> –, in an ongoing learning process (Leitao et al. 2015; Marchand et al. 2017). This section details our main guiding principles.

### 5.1. Emancipatory approach

Design is a widespread human talent that can be enhanced through training. Tapiskwan workshops aim to nurture the participants' capacity to design. This training involves the practice of making and realizing projects. As Ezio Manzini explains: “expert design is an activity in which people think and act by projects: they break the continuity of events and imagine a change in the state of things and how to bring it about” (Manzini 2015: 68). We hope to enhance the participants' confidence in their ability to act and accomplish their own projects.

Our approach was inspired by Paulo Freire's emancipatory approach for adult literacy. Freire (1968/2005, 1996) was critical of what he called '**banking education**', wherein learners are mere receivers — asked to silently absorb the information transmitted by the teacher. “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire 1970:72). This approach is deemed to increase the passivity of the learners and reduce their confidence

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4. Tapiskwan workshops: **First cycle (2013)** took place between July 26th and 31st (6 days) in La Tuque. This first cycle was conceived as a pilot-activity, as we were testing the interest of the participants for our approach. We worked with seven participants (11 - 33 years old). They conceived a collection of textile products – bandanas, tote bags and t-shirts. The **second cycle (2014)** took place between July 15th and 22nd (2 weeks) in Wemotaci. We worked with eight participants – six of them were 11-13 years old. They conceived a collection of greeting cards. In the **third cycle (2015)**, the training workshops took place between July 13rd to 24th (2 weeks) in Wemotaci. We worked with twelve participants, from three different generations (13-62 years old). They conceived and printed a collection of textiles. The production workshops took place between October 10th to 12th (3 days) in Wemotaci. We worked with seven participants, who conceived, printed and assembled a collection of textile products.

in their own talents and skills, contributing to their self-depreciation – therefore reinforcing the notion that only the formal education owned by dominant classes is valuable. We can see examples of this “banking” approach in cases where expert designers “transfer” design knowledge to local populations, creating a dependency on external input (Filho 2013; Thomas 2006).

Instead, Freire (1968/2005) proposes a **problem-posing education**, conceived as a partnership between teacher and student to investigate themes that are meaningful to the student’s everyday life. In this thematic investigation, students not only acquire literacy, but they become aware of the circumstances that surround them and develop the capacity to express their ideas and to act upon the world. “Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality” (Freire 1970: 84).

Freire (1968/2005, 1996) explains that teachers often use didactic materials with little relation to the learners' lives and knowledge. In contrast, in Freire’s approach, participants learn to read and write based on words that they use in their everyday life. By exploring the themes that surround those meaningful words, participants develop their ability to articulate their basic vocabulary with other words in order to express their reflections and beliefs. In Tapiskwan’s approach, *Atikamekw iconography constitutes the basic ‘vocabulary’ of the creation of new images and to the development of visual communication skills.*

## 5.2 Rediscovering their symbols

Even if there are several approaches of design workshops that use local iconography to revitalize traditional crafts, most approaches do not allow for the emancipation and creative development of local artisans. Borges (2011) explains that when outsiders make the inventory of local symbols, local artisans are not able to recognize themselves in those symbols, or to integrate them in their creative work. Borges argues that the ‘discovery’ of the iconography of traditional crafts is a process that must be experienced by the participants, based on the meaning that the community and themselves attribute to their symbols.

In the Tapiskwan workshops, this discovery is made through exchanges between cultural stewards, elders, artists, artisans and youth. We dedicate two days for

intergenerational exchanges – that are held in Atikamekw language –, creating a space where different generations use the ancestral symbols to share their stories and to reconnect with the history of their people. As a result, the traditional symbols are used to facilitate intergenerational dialogue.

By exploring the meaning of those symbols, participants are not only able to recognize and apprehend their iconographic heritage, but to interpret their iconography and reinvent it in their creative work. Freire (1968/2005) argues that creation and reinvention is fundamental to develop one's knowledge and awareness. The actions of this project aim to increase the participants' appreciation of their iconographic heritage and, at the same time, introduce them to the skills related to visual communication and printing techniques.

### **5.3. Empowerment**

Ultimately, Tapiskwan workshops aim to encourage the participants' empowerment. Our claim is that we can contribute to the empowerment of members of indigenous communities by nurturing their capacity to design. Empowerment can be understood as “a progression that helps people gain control over their own lives and increases the capacity of people to act on issues that they themselves define as important” (Luttrell and Quiroz 2009: 19). To deepen our discussion about empowerment, we adopt the framework developed by Naila Kabeer (2001). She identifies three inter-related dimensions of empowerment (1) **resources**, (2) **agency**; and (3) **achievements**.

(1) **Resources** can be material, social or human – encompassing knowledge, skills, creativity, etc. For Kabeer, “the terms on which people gain access to resources are as important as the resources themselves when the issue of empowerment is being considered” (2001: 20). Access may be provided on disabling forms of dependency relationships or may be achieved in ways which offer dignity and a sense of self-worth.

(2) **Agency** is the ability to define one's goals and act upon them (Kabeer 2001). Kabeer explains that agency “encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity” and also “reflection and action” (2001: 21) – all of them notions that are at the core of design activity (Schön 1983).

(3) **Achievements** are the outcomes of choices and actions. To achieve entails to translate agency and resources – the other 2 dimensions of empowerment – into tangible outcomes. Kabeer (2001) explains that a fundamental manifestation of disempowerment is the failure to achieve.

We argue that **design workshops held in disempowered communities essentially exercise the participants' capacity to achieve** – that is, to convert choices, actions and resources into tangible outcomes. To do so, the participants synthesize the resources they already have – their cultural heritage, talents, and skills – with the resources brought by the designers (design knowledge and skills, and printing techniques).

Specific short-term design projects – that we propose in the workshops – serve as small-scale experiences in which the participants establish a concrete goal – a project – and act to materialize it. In this process, they recognize their own resources – skills, creativity, cultural heritage, material resources available in the community, etc. At the end of the workshops, they have to produce tangible outcomes. The outcomes produced provide the participants with feedback, so that they can concretely reflect on the results of their choices and actions. They can compare their initial intention, their development and their final result. We ask them to reflect on their participation: *Are the outcomes aligned with our initial intentions? Is it the best use of our resources? What abilities could we develop to achieve a better result?*

#### **5.4. Sequence of short-term design projects**

In our first cycle of workshops, in 2011, we worked for eight weeks on some ambitious and overarching goals (Marchand & Leitao 2014). We realized afterwards that small short-term projects have more impact on the participants' self-confidence because the circuit of establishing a goal, realizing a project, reflecting upon the results, and identifying future opportunities is shorter. Therefore, a sequence of small-scale projects becomes the basis for reflection and discussion about the future (Leitao et al. 2015).

In a sequence of design workshops – with a sequence of small scale goals achieved – the participants can establish a reflexive dialogue with their situation; limits, opportunities, alternatives, gaining awareness of their choices, resources and ways

of acting. Design workshops, therefore, become a practical exercise of converting intentions, choices and actions into tangible outcomes. In this practice of achieving, the participants gain awareness and confidence in their power to act.

Tapiskwan workshops can be seen as a sequence of specific short-term design projects. In each summer, we work for one or two weeks towards a precise goal – for example, producing a series of bandanas and bags to be sold at the Pow Wow of Wemotaci.

### **5.5. Challenging goals**

In each edition of Tapiskwan workshops we work towards a precise goal, and it is always challenging: we have limited time and resources to accomplish it. This approach aims to enhance the participants' motivation and self-confidence, making them realize their own capabilities. Since so often members of indigenous communities are treated as incapable by institutions and the mainstream population, we challenge them to discover how skillful they can be.

Paulo Freire states that problem-posing education must be challenging:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. (...) Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (Freire 1970: 81)

Moreover, using limited resources means forcing the participants to recognize the resources they already have at hand. Manzini (2005) argues that an enabling design approach should allow people to fulfill their potential using their resources. This approach encourages the participants to recognize what they already have in order to create their own projects. It also helps them to identify with more precision the skills they need to develop and the resources they need to seek in order to achieve their desired outcomes.

### **5.6. Mentors as mediators and role models**

In the workshops, three of the major Atikamekw artists – Jacques Newashish, Christiane Biroté and Eruoma Awashish – serve as mentors to young participants.

The mentors take part in the activities proposed by the design team and use their talent and skills to respond creatively to the challenges and, doing so, they guide other participants through the tasks and serve as role models within the workshops.

Since they are accomplished artists who use traditional elements of Atikamekw culture in their contemporary production, they are able to act as mediators between different generations, realities and knowledge. They are responsible for making the knowledge and techniques brought by the design team accessible to the participants who have always lived within the reserve and do not have much knowledge about design. The mentors are also responsible of making the cultural knowledge from the elders applicable to youth's creative work.

### **5.7. Focus on internal demand: textiles**

Instead of directly targeting the global market, our products first target an internal demand within Atikamekw communities. We seek to stimulate the artisans' autonomy, i.e., they have to be able to take the creative decisions regarding their production. Initially, we cannot aim at marketing their products in a world or lifestyle that many of them have not experienced. If we did so, artisans would need a constant creative input from outsiders, hindering their autonomy. Once their products reach the local market, their production can also be sold in other markets.

In order to target this internal demand, Tapiskwan works primarily with textiles. Within the three communities, there is a huge use of fabrics in objects such as Pow Wow regalias, tents and hand-made bags. However, there are not any fabrics printed with Atikamekw symbols and motifs. Artisans decorate plain fabrics with beading, embroidery or appliqué, or use fabrics already decorated with stereotypical images of indigeneity.

As a result, we saw an opportunity to use Atikamekw iconography to the creation of patterns and to introduce some artisanal techniques of textile printing – such as silk screen, hand block and stencil. Artisanal printing techniques are less time-consuming than beadwork, embroidery and appliqué, which are usually expensive one-of-a-kind items. An important goal of this project is to reinforce youth's capacity to create representative images based on their traditional iconography, using contemporary techniques as a medium for their creative expression<sup>6</sup>.



## 5.8. Intergenerational aspect

In a perspective of facilitating the collaboration between different generations, working with textiles also proved to be a great channel for intergenerational dialogue. We work with adults who are accomplished tailors and seamstresses and have great experience in making regalia for Pow Wows. Youth, on the other hand, have the creativity and enthusiasm to learn graphic design and printing techniques. Both generations bring to Tapiskwan workshops what they are good at, as both generations learn textile design and printing techniques, and collaborate on the creation of new products.

## 6. TAPISKWAN WORKSHOPS 3.0

The third edition of Tapiskwan workshops<sup>7</sup> is a good example of our approach put in practice. It took place in the summer and fall of 2015, in the community of Wemotaci. It mobilized 15 Atikamekw community members – including the participants (youth and adults), three experienced artists who acted as mentors (Jacques Newashish, Christiane Biroté and Éruoma Awashish), two cultural stewards (Charles Coocoo and Christan Coocoo), and one entrepreneur (Karine Awashish).

### 6.1. Summer of 2015 – 2 weeks

Here is an overview of the phases, methods and activities developed in the two weeks of workshops.

#### Cultural immersion

The first two days were dedicated to a phase of cultural immersion. Cultural stewards presented Atikamekw history and heritage through images of ancestral iconography and stories about their meaning and significance in Atikamekw culture. Their presentations were followed by discussions between adults and youth.

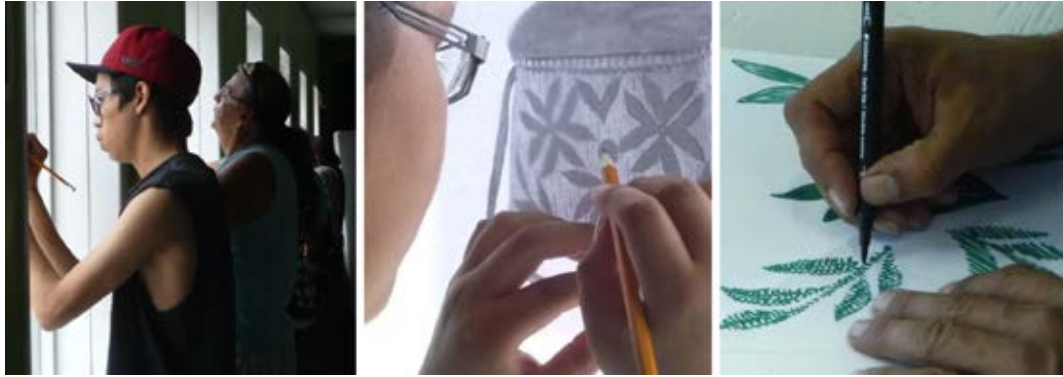
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6. Montreal's foremost textile design school, the Centre Design et Impression Textile de Montréal, was brought into the partnership for its expertise in textile design and printing techniques.

7. The design team was composed of three designers (Renata Marques Leitão, Cédric Sportes and Lucie Leroux, specialized in graphic, product, and textile design respectively) and a cultural anthropologist (Solen Roth).

## Drawing

The participants took part in a series of drawing exercises based on elements of Atikamekw iconography.



**IMAGE 4:** Drawing exercises.

## Visual Composition

The participants were introduced to the principles of visual composition – e.g., rhythm, balance, harmony and contrast – which they applied in a variety of exercises. In the exercises, the participants arranged a set of their Nation’s most meaningful symbols into original compositions and patterns. These activities were also an opportunity to become aware of the possibilities of creating a great diversity of compositions and patterns by using only four different symbols.



**IMAGE 5:** Michel Biroté and the family Biroté-Boivin do visual composition exercises; compositions created by the group.

### Motif & Pattern

The participants were invited to reinterpret elements of Atikamekw iconography to create a new motif. Afterwards, they experimented with their motifs to create patterns that could be printed on fabrics.



**IMAGE 6:** Kellyna Cocoo and Jacques Newashish reinterpret traditional motifs; pattern designed by Noat Boivin.

### Printing

The participants were introduced to a variety of artisanal printing techniques, including hand block, stencil, and silk-screen printing. The patterns and motifs developed in the previous phase were printed on fabric and paper.



**IMAGE 7:** Lucie Leroux teaches silk-screen printing; Noat Boivin uses a stencil to print her fabric; Christiane Biroté tries hand block printing.



**IMAGE 8:** Fabrics designed and printed by Jacques Newashish and Noat Boivin

### **Sewing and assembling products**

The participants used the printed samples to create several product prototypes, such as bags, cushion covers, and booklets. These prototypes have been created for their personal use or for loved ones. Since we introduced new techniques, at first, the participants needed to welcome those products into their everyday life in order to wholeheartedly adopt this new way of producing.



**IMAGE 9:** Prototypes created by Noat Boivin and Kellyna Cocoo; booklets assembled by the group.

## **6.2. Fall of 2015 – 3 days**

### **Collaborative production**

Because of the participants' manifested enthusiasm for their newly acquired skills, we decided to hold a three-day production workshop, in October, so that they could

apply what they had learned to the creation of a small line of products. Therefore, a smaller group came together for an intensive three days of work. Using the motifs developed over the summer, they produced a series of cushion covers, bags, and booklets marketed during the holiday season (Marchand et al., 2017).



**IMAGE 10:** Noat Boivin and Faith Boivin have fun with silk-screen printing; Christian Biroté sews a hand bag; products that were sold during the holiday season 2015.

## 7. FURTHER STEPS

The Tapiskwan workshops have led the participants to develop a better appreciation of the value of their traditional iconography and an awareness that their system of symbols can be a powerful vehicle for their self-expression and the representation of their Nation. After the 2015 workshops, several participants stated that they started to notice symbols everywhere. They started noticing how symbols are used for communication, especially in cross-cultural contexts.

Adults who took part in the workshops also started to devise some projects for the future. In a community with very few examples of entrepreneurship, they had ideas for businesses related to textile printing. For example, one of them realized that not only they could use the fabrics they make to manufacture marketable goods themselves, but they could provide other artisans with fabrics. Moreover, they could sell fabrics printed with Atikamekw patterns at Pow-wows, to members of other First Nations. Another participant realized that, since there are several hunting resorts located in Atikamekw ancestral territory, they could provide those

resorts with printed linen. They also realized that they could integrate youth in their productions, creating opportunities for intergenerational collaboration and professional development.

In order to put forward these projects, we felt the need for a collective organization of the production tailored to the specifics of Atikamekw ways of life and values. In 2015, we established a partnership with Nitaskinan Cooperative and a business school – HEC Montreal – in order to develop an entrepreneurial model adapted to Atikamekw culture. Ultimately, we aim to devise together a new model of indigenous entrepreneurship in order to turn Tapiskwan into a sustainable community initiative.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Tapiskwan is the result of a long-term commitment to community-based social innovation in which enhancing the participants' autonomy, agency and self confidence was set as a priority. Throughout the last four years, we changed a great deal of our understanding about the nature of design interventions. The fact that this project takes place in a developed country, in which the artisans' families receive social welfare, has invited us to move our focus from creating marketable products to creating the conditions for longer-term empowerment. Only once this process was put in motion were we able to return to the issue of commercial viability, to which we now turn again with our partnership with HEC Montréal and Nitaskinan Cooperative.

Usually short-term designers/artisans collaborations focus on creating products for the external market, assuming that the economic gains generated via sales would facilitate socio-economic development. In this context, we see two forms of design with social concerns: designing for the other – in which artisans manufacture the objects conceived by expert designers –, and designing with the other – that includes the input of the communities with whom designers collaborate. In both cases, designers aim to help the artisans achieve specific goals.

As Ezio Manzini (2015) suggests, we argue that it is time for designers to take a further step: support the ability of people to design for themselves. In this sense,

designers/artisans collaborations should support stakeholders' ability to envision and realize their own projects. This standpoint entails that we do not aim to achieve specific goals, but to create a virtuous circle of socio-economic development, empowerment and self-determination (Leitao et al. 2015). Such projects should be conceived as processes of collective discovery, in which designers and artisans learn together the challenges, opportunities and resources available, therefore aligning the intentions of several different stakeholders to the creation of a common vision. And this common vision can only be created with a long-term involvement with the community.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## **CHAPTER VI**

# **Graphic design as an instrument of identity assertion for indigenous peoples: the case of Tapiskwan project**

Renata Marques Leitão & Anne Marchand

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the potential contribution of graphic design practice to the assertion of the cultural identity of indigenous peoples. A graphic design intervention may be about increasing the power of self-representation of 'invisible' or misrepresented groups, enabling them to convey a recognizable identity, particularly through the use of visual symbols. We argue that this process is not a matter of Western designers co-creating logos and communication tools with indigenous communities. A graphic design approach should be about encouraging indigenous people to align their contemporary representations with their cultural heritage and aspirations. These issues have been explored in a participatory action research project, called *Tapiskwan*, realized in the context of the Atikamekw Nation (Quebec, Canada). In this project, we developed a methodology of graphic design workshops to enable Atikamekw artisans and youth to discover the value of their traditional symbols as meaningful forms of representation in the contemporary world.

## **KEYWORDS**

graphic design; indigenous cultures; identity assertion; representation; visual symbols; Atikamekw Nation; participatory action research; workshops

This study explores the potential contribution of graphic design to the assertion of cultural identity and the self-determination of indigenous peoples. Graphic design is frequently seen as cosmetic activity or as an instrument of marketing. In the last decades, numerous graphic designers have wondered how to put their skills to worthwhile use and participate in addressing complex social problems.<sup>1</sup> We suggest that a graphic design intervention can contribute to the construction and assertion of a positive identity to peoples who have been marginalized and/or suffered harsh assimilation processes.

Globalization has brought a wide variety of cultures to interact on a global scale as never before. A problem that arises is the capacity of specific cultural identities to communicate with each other and be recognized by one another.<sup>2</sup> There is a notorious difficulty of pluralistic societies to recognize the cultural identities of minorities.<sup>3</sup> Frequently, groups with distinct cultural identities are put under the same stereotyped label – a good example is the label ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’. These terms are used to refer to the descendants of the original inhabitants of colonized countries. Inside this label, there are numerous different peoples with different histories, languages, assets and struggles. Stereotyped labels limit the visibility of actual indigenous communities and the roles they can play in the global society.

As they are relatively powerless, indigenous groups do not control the representations of their cultures that circulate through mainstream media. The media shape our perceptions and opinions about the ‘others’ through oversimplified and stereotyped representations. UNESCO affirms that ‘in an environment increasingly saturated

by visual communication, imagery has the propensity to maintain, confirm and re-create such problematic representations of ‘others’ ad infinitum.<sup>4</sup> Being the activity that organizes visual communication in society,<sup>5</sup> graphic design plays an important role in this process of oversimplification.

Notwithstanding, this same activity that produces stereotyped representations can produce representations that assert the cultural identity of indigenous groups and may change common misperceptions of wider audiences.<sup>6</sup> A graphic design intervention might allow ‘invisible’ indigenous groups to convey a recognizable identity, particularly through the use of visual symbols. The use of symbols refers to the capacity to represent ourselves and to become recognizable by others. Indigenous populations have used visual symbols to mark their identifications for thousands of years.<sup>7</sup>

As stated by Moss, representations encompass processes of identification that includes **assertion** (how I see myself) and **ascription** (how others see me).<sup>8</sup> We propose that traditional symbols are powerful markers of cultural identity that can be used to mobilize a process of identity assertion by members of indigenous communities. In this study, we aimed to reactivate the use of an indigenous graphic heritage – from the Atikamekw Nation – as a meaningful form of representation in the contemporary world.

The study was conducted as a participatory action research project in the context of the Atikamekw Nation – one of the 10 First Nations in Quebec, Canada. This paper presents a five-year collaboration between a design team of the University of Montréal and Atikamekw stakeholders (accomplished artisans, artists, cultural stewards and entrepreneurs) to develop an approach consisting of design workshops aiming to enable the creative development, empowerment and identity assertion of Atikamekw artisans and youth – the Tapiskwan project.

Even though this project was developed in a specific context to address specific local problems, we were dealing with issues that may be meaningful to several indigenous communities worldwide. Several issues related to representation and identity assertion concerning visual communication, and tell us about the importance of research in graphic design in indigenous contexts. Therefore, we will first present an interdisciplinary literature review and then, our context-based project.

## 1. INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES

Indigenous peoples around the world share the legacy of European colonization and have faced problems such as dispossession of their lands, forced assimilation, discrimination, high levels of poverty, as well as lack of control over their own ways of life. In the last century, numerous native populations have experienced drastic changes in their conditions of life caused by postcolonial assimilatory policies. For Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson, ‘these profound transformations have been linked to high rates of depression, alcoholism, violence, and suicide in many communities, with the most dramatic impact on youth’.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, assimilation and ill-conceived development programs have deepened their disempowerment and their dependency on external resources to meet material needs.<sup>11</sup>

At this moment, indigenous activists worldwide are striving to shape a better life for themselves and their children, while underscoring their right to self-determination and their desire to maintain and celebrate their distinct cultural identities and ways of life.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1. Cultural products and stereotypes

As globalization has given rise to an intensified flow of cultural products, the increasing interest for indigenous crafts has created opportunities to promote economic development in impoverished communities. The marketing of native crafts, notwithstanding, entails several challenges, since artisans have to produce objects for clients with whom they do not have direct contact and do not share the same lifestyle.<sup>13</sup>

One of the biggest challenges is to communicate contemporary features of the producing community, because most urban clients are expecting to see peoples frozen in the past. Christen explains that indigenous artisans are inserted in a market that wants them to be traditional and authentic.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, the ‘authentic’ has to resemble the imagined portrayals constructed through the media – i.e., the ‘authentic’ is what conforms to the stereotypes.<sup>15</sup> A dominant stereotype associates authenticity ‘with the past “primitive Other” articulated in opposition to modernity’.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, an authentic object is not contaminated by modernity. Nevertheless, corresponding to the consumers’ ideas of the ‘authentic’ can threaten

to fossilize cultures as images from the past, impeding their creative evolution and adaptation to a changing environment.<sup>17</sup> To please the global and touristic markets, indigenous artisans reproduce the same objects and motifs from the past, but stripped of their original function and meaning, because this is what the customers are looking for.<sup>18</sup> Even with good intentions, this nostalgia for the ‘authentic’ can be seen as a form of cultural imposition from outsiders.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, these ideas about ‘authenticity’ reflect some outdated notions, revealing a lack of knowledge that ‘culture’ refers to both continuation and transformation.<sup>20</sup> Until the late Twentieth Century, there was a tendency to see cultures as essentially fixed, unchanging, rigidly bound and separate entities, with their content being transmitted between generations through a variety of channels<sup>21</sup>. **‘A current consensus regards cultures as systems that continually evolve through internal processes and in contact with the environment and other cultures’.**<sup>22</sup> UNESCO also suggests that we understand culture in terms of a creative process: ‘a process whereby societies evolve along pathways that are specific to them’.<sup>23</sup>

## 1.2. The construction of cultural identity

Arjun Appadurai argues that the most important feature of the concept of culture is the concept of difference:

(...) there are many kinds of differences in the world and only some of them are cultural. (...) I suggest that we regard as cultural only those differences that either express, or set the ground for, the mobilization of group identities.<sup>24</sup>

We are talking about the differences that separate human groups and create solidarity within each group. Appadurai stresses that culture does not refer to the possession of certain attributes by a group but **the consciousness of these attributes and their mobilization to articulate a group identity**. Those markers of difference – such as practices, beliefs, aesthetics, language or territory – must be recognized as meaningful and mobilized to enable the construction of a cultural identity.

UNESCO explains that cultures are not isolated and static – on the contrary, they exist in relation to one another, influence one another and mutually define one another.<sup>25</sup> Since cultures are permeable, we can visualize the markers of cultural difference as a screen: it establishes boundaries between one group and the others,



but it allows other attributes to interact and hybridize. Furthermore, the attributes chosen to mark difference are relative to the other groups with which we interact. For instance,

there was no Native American identity prior to contact with Europeans. (...) Before contact, indigenous people identified themselves as distinct from other indigenous people and constructed their identities in this way'.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.3. Identity and power

There is a huge difference of power between Western societies and indigenous groups, and so their identity is constructed inside a context of domination. In such context, Manuel Castells conceptualizes three forms of collective identities:

*Legitimizing identity*: introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalize their domination vis à vis social actors.<sup>27</sup>

In this process, demeaning attributes are ascribed to the less powerful groups, constraining the range of choices open to them and relegating them to situations of inferiority.<sup>28</sup>

*Resistance identity*: generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society.<sup>29</sup>

Resistance identity, for Castells, is a defensive identity. Often, native people are stereotyped as unable to integrate into modernity, but their behavior can be understood as resistance against assimilation. The construction of resistance identities, however, may entail some problems. Toomey suggests that it may reinforce the disempowerment of marginalized communities by fixating them as the 'others' of oppressing and dominant structures.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Weaver describes the process of resisting assimilation as often a resistance of 'goodness' as framed by white people.<sup>31</sup> She gives an example: doing well in school is defined as important by the white community, so North-American indigenous youth often drop out, 'not because they are "bad" or incapable of school success but as a way of defying the dominant society'.<sup>32</sup> Therefore those aspects of their identity are constructed by countering that which is defined as 'good' and 'ideal' by the dominant society – and not by projecting that which is good and ideal for themselves. *How can they define goodness in their own terms?*

*Project identity*: when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure.<sup>33</sup>

*Project identity* aims to change society by introducing new sets of values and ideals. Castells argues that identities that establish themselves in resistance may give rise to proactive projects. 'In this case, the building of identity is a project of a different life, perhaps on the basis of an oppressed identity, but expanding toward the transformation of society as the prolongation of this project of identity'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore project identities refer to self-determination. Castell argues that the construction and assertion of project identities are pivotal levers of social change.

#### **1.4. Representations and visual communication**

According to Moss, cultural identities are articulated in relation to representations, through processes that include **avowal** or **assertion** – how I see myself – and **ascription** – how others see me.<sup>35</sup> Image is a particularly important form of representation. 'There are a number of complex processes that constitute how people shape and enact their identities, including individuals' avowing self-image and/or accepting or rejecting ascribed images'.<sup>36</sup>

Groups that are relatively powerless tend to receive negative and/or limiting ascriptions from the dominant society.<sup>37</sup> Negative stereotypes have depicted indigenous peoples as 'primitive', 'idle' or unable to come to terms with modernity. Nowadays positive stereotypes idealize these cultures as ecologically and spiritually noble by New Age and anti-capitalist movements. The effects of both types of stereotypes are damaging, as they both do not recognize actual indigenous cultures. As philosopher Charles Taylor argues, 'nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, when negative ascriptions are internalized they become potent instruments of disempowerment.<sup>39</sup>

The process of constructing project identities involves creating positive images that community members can identify with and relate to. Moss argues that identification may take place 'with and through forms of representations, including signs, symbols, and artistic styles'.<sup>40</sup> Those images also have the goal of countering stereotyped depictions and social exclusion by embodying how they want to be

seen by others and who they want to become. Therefore, they deeply relate to the aspirations of the community and to forward thinking. For instance, Sahlins states that the current image of Maori people was constructed based on appealing attributes in order to enhance their power in New Zealand's society.<sup>41</sup>

Several indigenous and marginalized communities have taken the opportunities offered by the increased flow of cultural products to disseminate new representations<sup>42</sup>. At issue here is how to make consumers' quest for authenticity work to the advantage of indigenous artists and artisans. Communication tools – such as labels, posters, packaging and websites – are not only marketing tools, they can act as resources to educate nonindigenous audiences about the features of the community where the product was made. In the long term, designing visual communication can be a means to make minorities' identity recognizable to outsiders through the attributes chosen by the community.

At the same time, it is an opportunity for artisans to tell their own stories and create new representations of themselves. Therefore, creating visual communication is an instrument of identity assertion that can contribute to the (re)construction of identity of artisans and their communities.<sup>43</sup>

### **1.6. Visual symbols**

This study focused on one specific form of representation: visual symbols. ***We propose that visual symbols are powerful markers of cultural identity that can be used to mobilize identity avowal.***

Every society has symbols that are used to create identification. The systematic use of visual symbols enables groups of people to convey a recognizable identity. Currently, the use of visual symbols – as an element of branding – allows the identification of companies, organizations, causes and even nations. Indigenous populations have used visual symbols to mark their identifications for thousands of years.<sup>44</sup> Their systems of marks 'might have been inscribed on wood (carvings), the ground (sand diagrams), cloth, or the human body (as body painting, tattooing, or scarification)'.<sup>45</sup> For Mafundikwa, Westerners often do not understand that indigenous graphic symbols are not only decorative, in fact, they had an important communication role.

In my view, there is not a single Afrikan society without a system, however rudimentary, to preserve the oral communication of certain messages. The support of this common memory and the material of coded communication are essential for group cohesion, collective identity, and permanence, and for contact with other societies.<sup>46</sup>

Carey argues that systems of graphic marks 'could be "read" by the "literate" in the given society, and so could communicate effectively according to their design'<sup>47</sup>. Thus he proposes a non-Eurocentric definition of graphic design:

the set of visual and technical skills required to render these marks both attractive and effective as communication in the society concerned. Using this definition, the history of graphic design should expand to cover all such mark systems, visual and technical skills, and relevant modes of communication throughout human history.<sup>48</sup>

In a world where visual communication becomes increasingly important for indigenous people, how can they develop graphic design skills? Carey and Mafundikwa suggest they should start by studying the history of graphic design within their own culture. This process of developing a 'visual literacy' can be compared to Paulo Freire's emancipatory approach for adult literacy.<sup>49</sup> Freire argued that teachers often use didactic materials with little relation to the learners' lives. In contrast, in Freire's approach, students learn to read and write based on words that are familiar to them. Accordingly, in the process of developing visual communication skills, the system of symbols of each society should constitute the basic 'vocabulary' for the articulation of new representative images. Mastering their graphic traditions may become an important means of asserting their cultural identity.

## **2. A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN DESIGNERS AND ATIKAMEKW ARTISANS**

Atikamekw is one of Canada's First Nations, whose ancestral territory corresponded to central Quebec. Currently there are approximately 6,700 Atikamekws; close to 85% of them live in three reserves: Manawan, Opitciwan and Wemotaci<sup>50</sup>. Atikamekws are known as 'the people of the bark' because of their skill in crafting birch bark objects, such as canoes and baskets. Craft had a major importance to the construction of Atikamekw identity, as the denomination 'people of the bark' reveals. Atikamekw maintained a semi-nomadic way of life before the 1970s, when they

began to live on a permanent basis in three reserves. The reserves correspond to tiny portions of their ancestral territory, contrasting with the amount of land that they occupied previously.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, over the last century, they have seen their territory change drastically due to the construction of dams and railroads, logging and over-hunting. Assimilation policies have intensified the changes in their ways of life – the mandatory residential school system being a prime example of these policies. Atikamekw children were removed from their communities to be sent to distant catholic schools, where they were forbidden to speak their native language and practice their traditions.<sup>52</sup> Those drastic transformations have provoked an identity crisis.

At the present time, Atikamekw depend heavily on governmental aid, facing a very challenging socio-economic reality with particularly low levels of income, education, and employment.<sup>53</sup> To tackle the economic and identity crisis, Atikamekw are currently involved in the endeavor for self-determination, identity assertion and cultural revitalization.<sup>54</sup>

As part of those initiatives, in 2011, the Council of the Atikamekw Nation (Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw – CNA) established a partnership with our design team to address the challenge of producing Atikamekw crafts today. Our collaboration has focused on developing training strategies – in the form of design workshops – to enhance Atikamekw artisans' capacity to innovate.

At first, our partners identified two main problems affecting Atikamekw artisans: **(1) a perceived loss of cultural identity, (2) scarce supply of birch bark and moose hide** – the two most important raw materials of Atikamekw craft. It is noticeable that these two problems are inextricable, since Atikamekw's relationship with the natural resources found in the territory constitutes the core of their cultural identity.

These two problems – being so vast and complex – can be described as *wicked problems*, a key concept in design literature.<sup>55</sup> *Wicked problems* are too complex to be fully understood through comprehensive analyses.<sup>56</sup> Instead, designers adopt a strategy based on generating and testing conjectured solutions as a way of gaining understanding of the problem.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, our design team has developed knowledge by acting and dealing with the problems. The long-term immersion in the context enabled us to create a deeper understanding of the situation.

## 2.1 Markers of cultural identity

What defines Atikamekw identity today? That is a profound and complex question. As Rittel and Webber explain, when dealing with wicked problems, ‘the information needed to *understand* the problem depends on one's ideas for *solving* it’.<sup>58</sup> Our proposal was *to reveal attributes of Atikamekw cultural heritage that embody the essence of their society, but have been neglected – in other words, to mobilize new markers of identity.*

Appadurai suggested that cultural identity is articulated by the awareness and mobilization of some attributes that mark the difference between a human group and the others.<sup>59</sup> Sedentarization, assimilation and changes in territory have debilitated important markers of Atikamekw cultural identity. Furthermore, Canada’s First Nations are often characterized by their lacks and problems – negative markers. In this situation, we need to identify positive markers that can be mobilized for the construction of a contemporary identity: attributes that incite pride and self-esteem.

Blankenship points out that the discovery of an identity is not a simple task.<sup>60</sup> It is difficult for individuals to identify a defining but overlooked feature of their culture, because it is too familiar to them. It is like asking a fish to describe the water. For that reason, intercultural dialogue is important. Different views on the community may enable the recognition of something that has been seen everyday – and remained unnoticed – as a precious asset.

However, outsiders cannot ascribe an identity to the community – ‘as “the” identity to be offered to artisans, to be taken as their own’.<sup>61</sup> As Borges explains, ‘something an “outsider” considers as identity may not be felt or lived in the same way by an “insider”’.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, outsiders may facilitate the process of recognition and discovery of features that capture the essence of a people and a place. But it is the role of local people to affirm how they see themselves and to exercise their singularity.

## 2.2. Youth, tradition and innovation

Youth corresponds to more than 60% of Atikamekw population and are the most affected by both identity and economic crisis – presenting high rates of unemployment and lack of professional opportunities.<sup>63</sup> They receive mostly negative ascriptions

from the rest of the community, being seen as potential ‘problems’, due to inactivity and drug abuse. Therefore it is crucial that youth produce positive representations and engage in a process of identity assertion.

Youth, however, do not master the traditional techniques of representation – i.e., the practices that had characterized Atikamekw visual art. Life in reserves has reduced the occasions in which youth can learn with elders, since most activities of intergenerational transmission of heritage used to take place in the forest. Moreover, they have to deal with the lack of traditional raw material. Consequently, youth have the challenge to develop new modes of representation and self-expression, without losing their identification as Atikamekw.

Christian Coocoo (responsible for the cultural service of the Council of Atikamekw Nation, one of our most important Atikamekw partners) remarked that youth had a tendency to reproduce clichés, instead of being rooted in tradition in order to create something new. Coocoo has stated his desire that our design workshops could create the conditions for a return to the sources of Atikamekw culture. He expressed his hypothesis: **with a solid base, youth would be able to better develop their creativity and means of expression** – thus, strong roots could facilitate innovation.

In fact, tradition and innovation are not opposites, they are complementary. Sahlins argues that a lively tradition serves as a means and measure of innovation. Ezio Manzini suggests that social innovation involves a creative recombination of existing assets.<sup>65</sup> Since cultural heritage can be a great asset, stimulating innovation involves reviving some traditions and building a repertoire of cultural resources. In our design workshops, *we aimed to create the conditions for youth to understand the value and the meaning of their cultural resources in order to enhance their capacity to innovate.*

### **2.3. Atikamekw traditional graphic system**

Atikamekw have a tradition of engraving birch bark, which can be observed on their magnificent baskets and canoes. Since the beginning of our project, we were charmed by the beauty of traditional Atikamekw iconography. The objects had a very distinctive visual language that involved a style of representation, a graphic system of symbols, and some principles of composition.



FIGURE 1: Birch bark baskets. Source: McCord Museum.

We noticed, however, a gap between contemporary visual communication and the traditional visual language. Contemporary posters, websites, and signage usually had little or no connection with their graphic heritage – very often using clichés of indigeneity, such as feathers or dream catchers. And frequently, we see symbols from other native nations – such as Haïda or Navajo. Christian Coochoo wonders why Atikamekw need to use symbols from other nations if they have their own graphic heritage. It seemed that *Atikamekws have not yet realized that they could use their visual language and system of symbols to produce contemporary visual art and products*. In other words, most Atikamekws were not conscious of the value and potential uses of their system of symbols.

From this reflection, we created a project that received the name ‘Tapiskwan’ in 2013.

#### **2.4. Tapiskwan: symbols as vehicles for identity avowal**

Despite the scarcity of raw material that hinders Atikamekw craft practices, the system of symbols engraved on their objects constitutes by itself a rich cultural heritage. Our proposal was ***to dissociate the material and the symbolic aspects of Atikamekw craft***.

Both aspects of craftsmanship can be mobilized as markers of cultural identity. Nevertheless, the material aspect – including the practices of extraction and treatment of raw material and the making of objects – has had prevalence to the construction of Atikamekw identity. And it is precisely this aspect that has been



debilitated by the changes in the territory and in the ways of life. The symbolic aspect, on the other hand, does not depend on material conditions, but has been overlooked as a marker of identity.

We proposed that traditional symbols could be documented and used to create new products (such as textiles) and communication tools. The systematic use of symbols could create a recognizable identity for Atikamekw cultural products, increasing the appreciation of Atikamekw crafts by customers.

As the participants learn and teach the meaning, stories and knowledge recorded in the traditional symbols, it could allow a return to the roots of Atikamekw culture. Therefore, using traditional symbols could enable artisans to tell their stories to their families and community, asserting their affiliation to their Nation.

### **3. DEVELOPPING TAPISKWAN APPROACH**

One thing is to propose that symbols can be used to encourage identity assertion and to bypass the lack of traditional raw material. Another is to create a methodology of design workshops that enables Atikamekw artisans to (re)discover their graphic heritage and to integrate it in their creative production. In a practical level, our challenge was to develop an empowering approach of design workshops that could enhance the participants' creativity, and, at the same time, reactivate the use of their system of symbols as a meaningful form of representation.

We developed the Tapiskwan approach from 2013 to 2015. In each summer (2013-2014-2015), we held one or two weeks of design workshops to Atikamekw youth and adult artisans. Atikamekw partners (members of the Council of Atikamekw Nation, accomplished artists and entrepreneurs) took part in the definition of the goals and objectives, the planning of activities, the definition of criteria to select the participants of the workshops, and the evaluation of the results of each cycle of workshops. Each step of the project has been discussed with them. Their opinion has had major importance to set the goals of the workshops, to adjust activities and methods, and to plan follow-up actions.

The participants of the design workshops were youth with interest and/or a natural aptitude for visual arts and artisans who wanted to learn new skills. During and after the workshops, they were interviewed to allow us to assess the results and make some adjustments in our methods.

Even if we were constantly open to readjustments, we reached a stable strategy for the Tapiskwan workshops in 2015. In this section, we present the main issues and principles that guided the development of our approach.

### **3.1. Recognizing the value and potential uses of their graphic heritage**

Although there are several approaches of design interventions using local iconography to revitalize traditional crafts, most approaches do not allow for the emancipation and creative development of local craftspeople.<sup>66</sup> Borges argues that if the inventory of local symbols is made by outsiders, artisans might not be able to recognize themselves in those symbols or to integrate them in their creative work<sup>67</sup>. Therefore, the ‘discovery’ of the iconography is a process that must be experienced by the participants, based on the meaning that artisans and the community attribute to their symbols.

Nevertheless, how could we motivate participants to document their system of symbols and their meaning? In the beginning, most Atikamekws were not aware of the value of their symbolic heritage and its potential uses. Why should they document something that they did not yet recognize as beneficial?

Thus we established an initial goal: ***to make participants recognize graphic heritage as a valuable asset, which can be useful for accomplishing contemporary projects***. From this recognition, in a subsequent phase, we could undertake the documentation of the Atikamekw graphic heritage.

How could participants recognize their symbols as assets? We believe that a real recognition passes by incorporating the symbols into their practices – in other words, by putting them in use. In the design workshops we created the condition in which ***they had to use their symbols to accomplish a project*** – i.e., creating new products. Doing so, we brought some potential gains close to the horizons of the participants.

### **3.2. Mentorship**

In the workshops, three of the major Atikamekw artists – Jacques Newashish, Christiane Biroté and Eruoma Awashish – worked as mentors of young participants. They were responsible for making the knowledge and techniques brought by the design team accessible to the participants. Since they were used to integrating traditional elements of Atikamekw culture and contemporary influences into their production, they served as role models.

### **3.3. Tapiskwan workshops: step-by-step**

Even if the approach of Tapiskwan workshops is based on complex concepts, we believe that the method itself has to be very straightforward. Our goal is to enable Atikamekw artists, artisans and educators to reproduce the recipe independently in the future. In this section we describe briefly our step-by-step formula

#### ***a) What is graphic heritage? Examples from other indigenous cultures***

We explain the goals of the workshops by showing examples of visual languages from several indigenous cultures. We show how traditional symbols are applied in contemporary products and how the use of the graphic heritage has enabled several native peoples to convey a recognizable identity.

The design team also brings many photos of Atikamekw traditional crafts, so the participants can look at the collection and realize that Atikamekw objects have a distinctive visual language: a style of representation and a system of symbols.

#### ***b) Cultural immersion***

In this phase, cultural stewards present the meaning, stories and knowledge registered in Atikamekw symbols. And doing so, they present part of the history of their people through Atikamekw traditional iconography.

After the presentations, the participants take part in drawing exercises based on elements of Atikamekw iconography.



**FIGURE2A:** Christian Coccoo gives a presentation on Atikamekw history and iconography. **FIGURE2B:** Participants take part in drawing exercises.

### c) *Visual composition*

The participants are introduced to principles of visual composition. They are lead to understand that meaning is not solely conveyed by the symbols themselves, but also by their arrangement in space.

In the exercises, the participants arrange a set of four of the most important Atikamekw symbols into original compositions. The goal of the exercises is to make them aware of the possibility of creating a great diversity of compositions with a few symbols.



**FIGURE3:** Faith Boivin, Christiane Biroté (3a) and Kellyna Coccoo (3b) take part in visual composition exercises.

#### ***d) Motif and pattern***

In this phase, the participants choose one meaningful symbol and reinterpret it to create a personal motif. Afterwards, they experiment with repetitions of their motifs to create patterns.



**FIGURE4A:** Kellyna Cocoo reinterprets traditional motifs. **FIGURE4B:** Pattern designed by Noat Boivin.

#### ***e) Artisanal printing***

The participants are introduced to artisanal printing techniques: hand block, stencil, and silk-screen printing. Using stencils and blocks, the motifs developed in the previous phase are printed on fabric and paper. The design team introduced those techniques because they could enable low-cost reproduction.



**FIGURE5A:** Jacques Newashish tries hand block printing. **FIGURE5B:** Noat Boivin uses a stencil to print her fabric.



**FIGURE6:** Patterns created by Christiane Biroté, Jacques Newashish and Michel Biroté.

#### *f) Products*

The participants use the printed samples to create prototypes – such as bags, cushion covers, and booklets.

#### *g) Interviews as moments of reflection*

Since our approach is project-based and hands-on, we realized that participants needed quiet moments of reflection in order to integrate what they learned. In 2014, we noticed that individual interviews were not only moments to collect data, those discussions with members of the design team enabled them to become more confident about their progression. And so, individual interviews with one or two members of the research team are important steps, in which participants are encouraged to make sense of what they are learning, experiencing and creating.



**FIGURE7A:** Kellyna Cocoo explains to Lucie Leroux the inspiration for her motifs. **FIGURE7B:** Her final product.

## 4. FINDINGS

The third edition of Tapiskwan workshops took place in the summer of 2015 (July 13-24th), in the community of Wemotaci. It mobilized 10 participants (youth and adults). Three accomplished artists acted as mentors (Jacques Newashish, Christiane Biroté and Eruoma Awashish). Two cultural stewards (Christian Coocoo and Charles Coocoo) gave presentations about the meaning of Atikamekw graphic heritage.

During the workshops, the research team made two individual interviews with each participant and mentor. Two months later (September 12-14th), we interviewed participants, mentors and partners to learn their feedback about the workshops and their plans for the future.

Here are some of the participants' comments, grouped by themes:<sup>68</sup>

### 4.1. Reconnection with the symbols and Atikamekw cultural heritage

After the 2015 workshops, several participants stated that they started to notice symbols everywhere. And so, they became aware of the importance of symbols for communication. All the participants stated that they appreciated what they learned about the meaning and stories related to traditional symbols with the two cultural stewards.

Even the accomplished artists, who collaborated in the workshops as mentors, found that knowledge very meaningful. For Christiane Biroté, collaborating in the project meant a reconnection with her culture. And so, she was able to better appreciate the symbolic content of her creative work. Eruoma Awashish found the symbol that she currently uses as her personal logo in a Tapiskwan workshop. And so, the project helped her to brand her production.

Jacques Newashish and Dominic Boivin identified an important issue. The Atikamekw ancestral territory corresponds to central Quebec. Presently there are numerous fishing and hunting outfitters in the area, which receive a considerable number of tourists from Europe every year. We do not see Atikamekw symbols in any touristic establishment. For them, it is time to see Atikamekw symbols spread across their territory, marking their presence.

## **4.2. Using symbols as vehicles to represent their stories and identity**

Mafundikwa argued that certain African peoples used symbols to preserve part of the collective memory of their oral tradition.<sup>69</sup> Therefore symbols may act as supports for oral communication, allowing stories to be told around them.

Charles Coocoo, an Atikamekw spiritual leader, argues that as important as creating images with the symbols is being able to talk about them. For Jacques Newashish, artists have to reflect before making something. There is a story and a meaning behind what they create and it is important to develop the capacity to put it in words.

The design team created many opportunities in which the participants were invited to verbalize the reasons for choosing a specific symbol as an inspiration for their personal motif. Many times the symbols were related to the stories of their family, sometimes they were related to recurrent visions and dreams, and sometimes they were important to Atikamekw Nation. All the participants had something meaningful to tell about their personal motif.

## **4.3. Learning artisanal printing**

During the interviews, we realized something unexpected: Atikamekw elders had a tradition of reproducing motifs on their moccasins (and other objects made of moose hide), using a technique that was similar to stencil. Jeannette Boivin told us how the elders used to trace the motifs through their hand-made stencils and then embroider over the outline. Atikamekw traditional motifs were reproduced on several objects, and each family had a collection of motifs that was handed down across generations. Therefore, a form of stencil reproduction was already part of Atikamekw culture.

In western graphic design schools, at first, we usually learn artisanal printing techniques, and then we learn how they evolved into industrial techniques. We realized that we could make a similar link. In Tapiskwan workshops, learning artisanal printing is also an opportunity to tell the stories about the ways Atikamekw elders used to reproduce their motifs.

Learning textile printing inspired some participants to devise ideas for businesses. For example, Dominic Boivin realized that not only they could use the fabrics they



print, but they could also provide other artisans with fabrics. Moreover, they could sell fabrics printed with Atikamekw patterns for outsiders. Another participant realized they could provide printed linen to the hunting resorts located in Atikamekw territory. Those ideas show that participants had grasped the potential applications of their graphic heritage.

#### **4.4. Visual composition**

The visual composition exercises were very limiting (each participant received the same set of four symbols) in order to force them to use their creativity and imagine new ways of arranging the symbols on a surface. Despite the limitations, we received some surprisingly positive feedback.

After the workshops, the design team prepared some silkscreens with the personal motif created by each participant. The mentors asked us to also make screens with the ‘generic’ motifs created during the composition exercises. In the subsequent textile printing workshop – held in October 2015 – some participants even preferred printing the ‘generic’ motifs than their own personal motif. We can estimate that some artisans found it very meaningful to use the traditional symbols as an ‘alphabet’ or a basic ‘vocabulary’ to create a variety of compositions and patterns. Self-expression, in this case, is not only about the creation of new symbols, but also about the creative arrangement of traditional symbols.

Atikamekw graphic heritage seems to be a system of symbols that are meant to be continuously rearranged and recombined.

#### **4.5. Bridging tradition and innovation**

In May 2013, our partner Christian Coocoo had stated his hypothesis: ***with a solid base, youth would be able to better develop their creativity***. He considered that several products conceived in the first two workshops (in 2013 and 2014) were not satisfactory: they seemed ‘folkloric’, reproducing clichés and not looking innovative or contemporary.

In 2015, we strived to develop an approach that could effectively bridge tradition and innovation. First, we enhanced the phase of cultural immersion by making it

the very first activity and dedicating two full days to it. Second, we added the phase of visual composition. In the two previous editions, right after the presentation of the cultural steward (Charles Coocoo), participants were asked to reinterpret the traditional symbols. In 2015, after the cultural immersion, we asked the participants to create compositions with the traditional symbols themselves. It seems that this exercise enabled the participants to integrate their graphic heritage into their creative work.

Looking at the textiles and products created in 2015, Coocoo was very satisfied with the results. For him, his hypothesis was confirmed: being rooted enables creativity. Most images and products were original and, at the same time, they exuded Atikamekw identity.

## **5. FURTHER STEPS**

The workshops aimed to create the conditions for the participants to understand the value and the meaning of traditional symbols. Our next goal is to undertake the documentation of Atikamekw graphic heritage. Until this moment we have worked with a small set of symbols, collected by the design team. We aim to create an inventory of the traditional symbols and the meaning and stories associated to them that can be accessed by Atikamekw artists and artisans. The challenge here consists in developing a collaborative approach for this process of documentation.

As we have the goal of enabling educators of the three Atikamekw communities to give Tapiskwan workshops independently in the future, the next step is to produce a guide to this methodology (or a toolkit) to be used by Atikamekw art educators. We hope that in a few years Atikamekw youth will learn to use their system of symbols at school.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Presenting the case of Tapiskwan project, we hope to illustrate a potential contribution of graphic design to the assertion of the cultural identity of indigenous

peoples. One aspect of graphic design activity involves the creation and/or communication of a recognizable and distinctive identity. As Taylor argues: ‘due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.’<sup>70</sup> In this sense, graphic design refers to an essential human power: the power to create representation in order to assert who you are and to influence how you are perceived by others. Accordingly, a graphic design intervention may be about increasing the **power of self-representation** of ‘invisible’ or misrepresented groups.

We argue that creating a recognizable visual identity is not a matter of co-creating logos and communication tools with indigenous communities. A graphic design approach should create the conditions for the community to embark on a process of identity assertion – and so, becoming aware of the specific features of their visual representations. It is about encouraging a reflection about that which is essential to their self-image and that which can make them recognizable by others, therefore encouraging individuals and communities to align their representations with their cultural heritage, their aspirations and forward-thinking. Graphic design practice, therefore, may enable processes of creating contemporary representations that are essential to the construction of a project identity and to redefine one’s position in society.

**NOTES**

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5. Frascara, "Graphic Design".
6. Tyler, "Shaping Belief".
7. Mafundikwa, *Afrikan Alphabets*.
8. Moss, "Cultural Representation", 375.
9. UN, *Indigenous People*.
10. Kirmayer et al., "Mental Health", 3.
11. Guindon, "Technology, Material Culture".
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16. Cole. "Beyond Authenticity", 944.
17. Borges, *Design + Artesanato*. Hill, "Indigenous Culture". UNESCO, *Cultural Diversity*.
18. Bousquet, "Tourisme, Patrimoine et Culture".
19. Hill, "Indigenous Culture". Yang, "Ethnic Tourism".
20. Cunha, "Culture" and Culture.
21. Sahlins, "Anthropological Enlightenment".
22. UNESCO, *Cultural Diversity*, 8.
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24. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 13.
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26. Weaver, "Indigenous Identity", 242.
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30. Toomey, "Empowerment and Disempowerment".
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32. Idem.
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34. Ibid., 10.
35. Moss, "Cultural Representation", 375.
36. Ibid., 390.
37. Taylor, "Politics of Recognition".
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41. Sahlins, "Two or Three Things", 402.
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46. Mafundikwa, *Afrikan Alphabets*, 9.
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49. Freire, *Pedagogia do Oprimido*.
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51. Poirier, "The Atikamekw".
52. Jérôme, "Jeunesse, musique et rituels"
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55. Rittel and Webber, "Wicked Problems".
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57. Cross, "Discovering Design Ability".
58. Rittel and Webber, "Wicked Problems", 136.
59. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

60. Blankenship, "Outside the Center".
61. Borges, *Design + Artesanato*, 145.
62. Ibid., 143.
63. Awashish, "Economie sociale".
64. Sahlins, "Anthropological Enlightenment".
65. Manzini, "Making Things Happen", 57.
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# 3

**Discussion &  
conclusion**



## **CHAPTER VII**

### **Discussion: Culture as a project**

*[Revolutionary futurity] affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future.*

(Freire 1970: 84)

## **1. SUMMING UP**

In this dissertation, I argued the capacity to effect intentional change upon immediate material circumstances is particularly important to indigenous peoples who are striving to redefine their place in the world and to forge a better life while dealing with the legacy of colonialism and the consequences of assimilation policies.

In chapter IV, I suggested that design practice might play a part in the empowerment of indigenous communities when coupled with an emancipatory approach of training. I worked with the conceptualization of empowerment proposed by Naila Kabeer (2001, 2012). In her definition, empowerment “refers to the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 2001: 19). Strategic life choices are linked to a project: a life project, an identity project, a societal project. If people do not have a project of a good life, no choice can be “strategic” in Kabeer’s sense – that is, the-life-one-wants has to be envisioned in order to guide his or her choices. Thus, an empowered individual or community has developed the capacity to make projects and plans — envisioning a future desired situation and making choices that are conducive to its materialization.

Since being trained as a designer entails learning how to think and act by projects (Manzini 2015), nurturing people’s inherent capacity to design might encourage their empowerment. However, not every alliance between designers and local communities can facilitate people’s empowerment. Empowerment cannot be attained if one group gives resources while the others are merely receivers – and we are talking about material or immaterial resources (i.e., knowledge, information,

techniques and technologies). A design training has to be emancipatory on itself, allowing people to recognize their own assets and to develop self-confidence – i.e., valorizing who they are, what they have and what they can do.

Chapter V is the practical and context-based complement of the previous one. It shows how those theoretical principles were translated in a strategy of design workshops. This chapter presents the features of the Atikamekw context that guided the development of the Tapiskwan approach. In the workshops, we aimed to enhance the participants' creativity and capacity of self-representation and, at the same time, increase their appreciation of their cultural heritage. An essential aspect of our approach is to foster collaborations between Atikamekw youth and elders in order to facilitate the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and the renewal of cultural practices.

Tapiskwan workshops are focused on a specific aspect of Atikamekw cultural heritage: the symbols engraved or embroidered on their traditional crafts. The workshops lead participants to recognize the value of their traditional iconography and realize that their symbols can be powerful vehicles for their self-expression and the representation of their Nation.

Chapter VI examines the significance of working with Atikamekw visual symbols. Symbols can be instruments for self-identification and markers of cultural identity. Briefly, the use of visual symbols concerns the capacity to represent ourselves and to become recognizable by others. The Tapiskwan workshops aimed to reactivate the use of Atikamekw graphic heritage as a meaningful form of representation in the contemporary world.

In chapter VI, I also inquired into the construction of a cultural identity as a project of a better life, based on the conceptualization proposed by Manuel Castells (2010). Castells argues that project identities aim to change society by introducing new sets of values and ideals. “In this case, the building of identity is a project of a different life, perhaps on the basis of an oppressed identity, but expanding toward the transformation of society as the prolongation of this project of identity” (Castells 2010: 10). How could we introduce new values and ideals? I argue it is essential to create new representations that community members can identify with and relate to. At the same time, those new images have the goal of countering stereotyped and negative depictions by embodying how members of the community want to be



seen by others and who they want to become. In other words, creating new visual representations may be about projecting a different (and desirable) life.

**Therefore at the heart of this dissertation is the notion that the capacity to create and realize projects is a fundamental lever of self-determined change.** It relates to the manner in which people envision the future and engage in forward-looking behavior.

## 2. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL DESIGNERS

This goal of this study is to generate a better understanding about the potential roles of designers in tackling complex social problems in collaboration with indigenous communities. I hope to contribute to the discussion about the features, possibilities and purposes of social design (or design for social innovation).

There is an increasing number of designers who wish to actively participate in addressing, and ultimately solving, complex social problems (Shea 2012) — I am one of them. There is a huge difference, however, between designing products and services and designing social change (Janzer & Weinstein 2014), and the design community is still struggling to understand and define the role of the designer in such situations.

In the last decades, we have seen a shift from *designing for* the other (the poor and underserved) — the first form of social design — to *designing with* the other — including the input of the communities with whom we collaborate. *Designing for* the other implies that the other is incompetent. As stated in the introduction, even with the best intentions, providing people with Western technologies is an expression of imperialism that helps to dehumanize the people being helped (Kabeer 2001; Smith 1999). *Designing with* is about creating a product or a service to the community — and sometimes new products and services are greatly needed to ease a distress. Moreover, '*designing with*' implies that we do understand what the problem is and we collaborate with the other to create a solution. For example, there is a habitation crisis in Wemotaci. Not only the community is lacking dwellings — and many families live in overcrowded spaces —, but the existent houses are unfit to Atikamekw lifestyle. Therefore, there is a clearly defined problem — building

new houses that correspond to people's needs. *Designing with* – using human-centered design, design thinking or similar approaches — works very well in such situations. However, in this case, we are only solving a problem, we are not trying to change the structures that created the problem or encouraging social change (Tonkinwise 2015).

At this moment, as suggested by Manzini (2015), I believe that designers need to take another step: support the ability of people to design for themselves. This standpoint also entails a redefinition of the role of the social designer: someone who supports with their knowledge and skills the talent of stakeholders to define and act upon their own projects, enabling people to be able to reshape their own circumstances.

This standpoint entails that social designers do not aim at solving specific problems or creating a 'magic pill' to solve other people's problems, but at creating a virtuous circle of socio-economic development, empowerment and self-determination in long-term collaborations with the communities. Such long-term collaborations should be conceived as processes of collective discovery, in which designers and local stakeholders learn together the challenges, opportunities and resources available, therefore aligning the intentions of several different stakeholders to the creation of a common vision – a collective project – and to the materialization of this vision.

### 3. CULTURE: HERITAGE AND PROJECT

To deepen the discussion about the creation of collective projects, I will examine a statement made by West-African intellectual Paul Hountondji: “**culture is not only a heritage, it is a project**” (cited in Sahlins 1999a: xxi). Verhelst and Tyndale affirmed something very similar: “A lively culture is both a heritage and a project. It gives meaning and direction” (2002: 11).

Culture is a **heritage** that gives resources and meaning to human existence. And it is also a **project** of the ideal of the good life for that culture and the acceptable means to achieve it – what gives us direction (Appadurai 2004; Sen 2004; Verhelst & Tyndale 2002). Referring to self-determination, I believe that **we should consider every lively culture as a project of the good life.**

The idea of culture as a heritage is easy to grasp. In the last century, there was a tendency to see cultures as essentially fixed, unchanging, rigidly bounded and separated entities, with their content being transmitted between generations through a variety of channels (Cunha 2009; Sahlins 1999a). Today anthropologists have a more dynamic outlook, considering that cultures are in constant flux and transformation (Willow 2010). Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson argue for culture to “be appreciated as a co-creation by people in response to current circumstances” (2009: 20). Culture, however, is not a property – inherited or co-created – that can be separated from the people who live it. Brown notes that “if global cultural diversity is preserved on digital recording devices while the people who gave rise to this artistry and knowledge have disappeared, then efforts to preserve intangible property will be judged a failure” (2005: 54).

Culture is ultimately a life pattern (Verhelst & Tyndale 2002), something people live. In this sense, UNESCO (2009) suggests that we should understand ‘culture’ as a verb and not as substantive. “The most important issue is to avoid reification, to move along the grammatical continuum from substantives towards verbs. The ‘problem’ with reification is that it tends to consolidate what is, to mask what is becoming” (Alexander 2007, in UNESCO 2009: 20). By paying attention on *what-is-becoming*, we consider the other aspect of a culture: the project.

What do we mean with project? It means that culture is the matrix for future development. Culture contains a society’s perception of the meaning of life and of what constitutes ‘well-being’, ‘happiness’, and a ‘good life’ (Verhelst & Tyndale 2002). The pursuit of the good life is what gives direction to human choices and actions (Ehrenfeld 2008). The norms of a society also define the acceptable means to achieve that ideal happiness (Sen 2004). As Kirmayer, Brass and Valaskakis explain, “a vibrant culture has clear social roles, standards of excellence associated with those roles, and the possibility of one’s becoming a person who embodies those ideals” (2009: 465). Briefly, culture is the matrix through which we shape our presence, as humans, in the world.

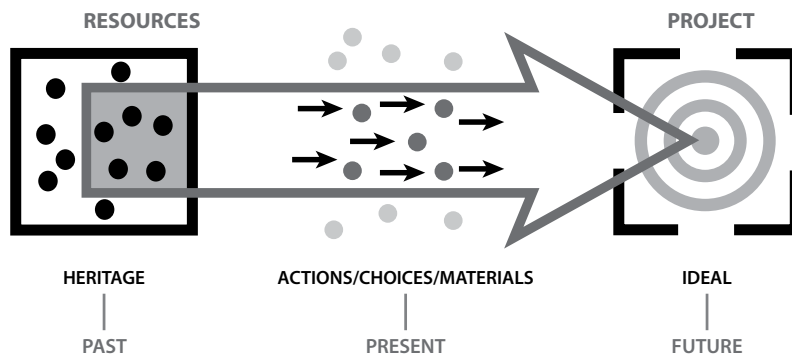
### **3.1. Culture as futurity**

Even though anthropological discourse has incorporated a dynamic outlook of the ‘concept’ of culture, Appadurai (2004) argues that one dimension of culture is

almost never discussed explicitly: **its orientation to the future**. He suggests that we place **futurity**, rather than pastness, at the heart of our thinking about culture.

In fact, most approaches to culture do not ignore the future. But they smuggle it in indirectly, when they speak of norms, beliefs, and values as being central to cultures, conceived as specific and multiple designs for social life. But by not elaborating the implications of norms for futurity as a cultural capacity, these definitions tend to allow the sense of culture as pastness to dominate. (Appadurai 2004: 60-61)

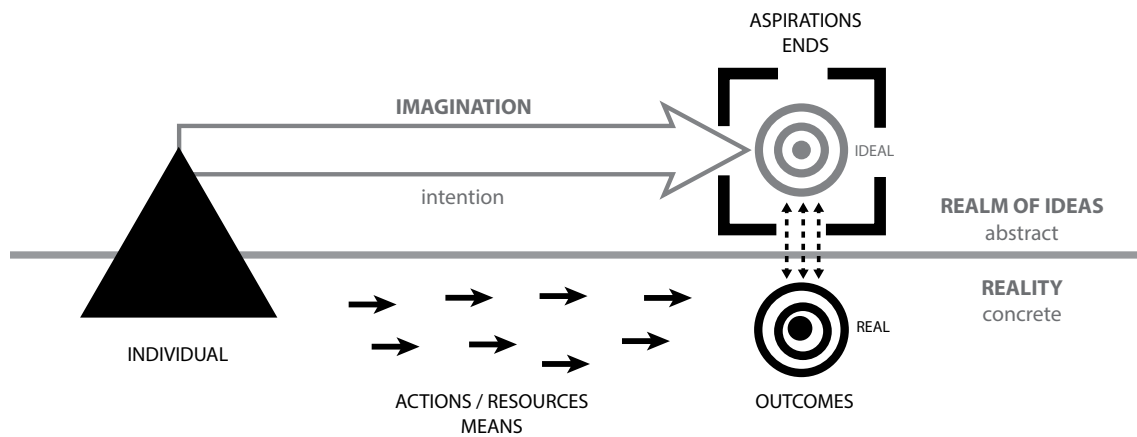
Inspired by Appadurai, UNESCO suggests that we understand cultures as ‘trajectories towards the future’ (2009: 199). In other words, it is a trajectory that links heritage to the ideal of well-being.



**FIGURE 1:** The pursuit of the ideal shapes the current practices and motivates the selection of the past inheritance that will be mobilized as a resource to realize the envisioned project. A part of the materials of the present also has to be selected and mobilized as a resource. The heritage is combined with the materials of the present to materialize the ideal project inside the aspirational frame. It is an interactive and on-going process, as attainable visions of future become clearer when we are aware of our choices and resources and, furthermore, when we put them in use.

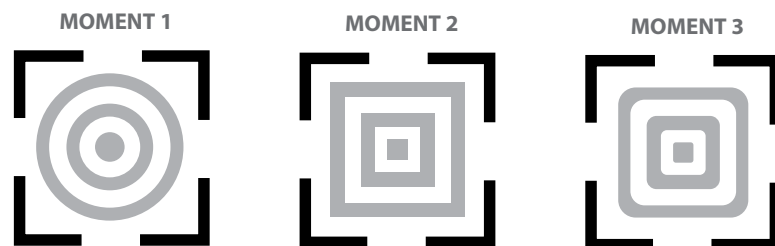
When we understand ‘culture’ in terms of ‘trajectories towards the future’, ‘design’ becomes an essential instrument of cultural life – responsible for bringing about intentional changes into the world, in our attempts to create the reality that we long for. In the pursuit of the good life, people and communities evolve. And they continuously create artificial things – instruments, symbols, artifacts, policies, institutions, environments, languages, and so on – in striving to flourish, to achieve that which they imagine is a good life. A part of the things that are produced throughout this trajectory constitutes the heritage. But culture is not only about these things, culture is about the collective project that drives and directs their production.

These trajectories towards the future can be seen as creative processes. The values, norms and beliefs of a human group produce an aspirational frame. However, images of the ideals have to be actively created by individuals in order to motivate forward-looking behaviors – as in the model presented in chapter IV.



**FIGURE 2** shows a snapshot of the design process. The frame of aspirations is shaped by the values and norms of a social group. Inside this frame, the intention to change the existing situation generates ideas about that which is desirable (the ideal). Therefore imagination is brought about by intention. At the same time, the image of the ideal becomes a target to the process of aiming and planning our concrete actions. Thus, envisioning a target (ideal outcome) reinforces our intentions. With an image/target in mind, resources and actions are mobilized to manifest the ideal in the real world. Individuals belong to both realms: they produce abstract ideas of aspirations and images of desired outcomes but, in order to produce tangible outcomes, their action must take place in the real world.

Being an interactive and ongoing process entails that the frame remains relatively stable, however, the visions of the desirable future are continually being refined and recreated based on the current circumstances.



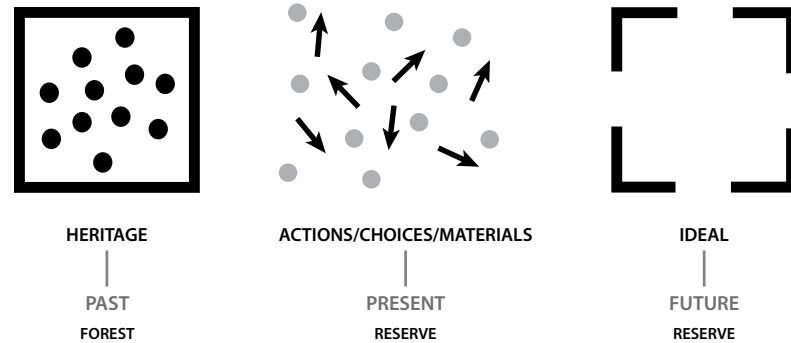
**FIGURE 3:** Three different visions of that which is ideal inside the same aspirational frame.

### 3.2. Bridging past and future

The problem is that communities who suffered harsh assimilation processes have been disconnected from the project of the good life of their societies. In the last century, several Canadian indigenous peoples, such as the Atikamekws, experienced a drastic rupture with their ways of life – caused by policies such as sedentarization, relocation to remote regions, residential schools, among other factors. It is important to note that the Atikamekws had a seminomadic way of life until the 1970s. Furthermore, in the 1960-1970s, children were sent to residential schools. Thereby, Atikamekw society has recently experienced a collapse. In such contexts, Kirmayer, Brass and Valaskakis draw attention to a problem: “how to continue to define a good life – and oneself as a virtuous person within that way of life – when all the social structural features of that life are shattered?” (2009: 465). Not only the social structural features of their way of life were shattered, their material life was drastically transformed by assimilation (Guindon 2015) – as discussed in chapter IV. A great deal of their material circumstances was imposed by outside institutions. Therefore, they have to work with immediate material conditions –the materials of their present situation – that are incompatible with their traditional ways of life.

In a study about Algonquin youth, Bousquet (2005) suggests that there is a rupture between the ‘traditional’ culture – that which from the past, situated in the forest – and the modern life, situated in the reserve. Bousquet states that, for youth, the reserve is the place of their present, where they cannot follow the models from their ancestors anymore. Algonquins continue to identify their culture as the life in the forest, even if they cannot practice that way of life in the reserves. Rather, the reserve is a place where apathy and idleness reign.

Il est frappant de constater que les jeunes de 1996, comme ceux de 2003, font très souvent allusion à l’oisiveté et à l’absorption d’alcool et d’intoxicants quand ils parlent de la réserve. « Ici, y a rien à faire », disent tous les informateurs. (Bousquet 2005 : 13)



**FIGURE 4:** When disconnected from the projective dimension of their culture, people's present actions and choices do not link their heritage to attainable visions of the future.

According to Bousquet (2005), the future of Algonquin culture will take place within the reserve. As a result, it is necessary to create new references and youth have a great desire to innovate.

Leur position majeure paraît être le désir d'innover, en investissant la réserve de nouveaux repères, mémoriels, légaux, sociaux. Leurs parents se trouvaient déjà, du temps de leur jeunesse, dans la nécessité de repenser les modèles. (Bousquet 2005: 15)

The same can be said about Atikamekw culture. Therefore, it is time to create new models that align the roots and values of their culture with their present material circumstances in order to project a desirable future. In this sense, infusing the material circumstances that were imposed to them with their creative power.

Those communities have not yet produced new achievable projects of the good life – that is, projects that make use of the materials of their current situation. Freire (1970) suggests that people who live within oppressive circumstances should avoid fatalism. Instead, he invites people to apprehend their current situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation – not only from the ruling classes, but mostly from their own agency.

Since people do not exist apart from the world, apart from reality, the movement must begin with the human-world relationship. Accordingly, the point of departure must always be with men and women in the "here and now," which constitutes the situation within which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene. Only by starting from this situation— which determines their perception of it—can they begin to move. To do this authentically they must perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting—and therefore challenging. (Freire 1970: 85)

Thus, an essential contribution of a design intervention, in such contexts, is to enhance their capacity to conceive their own projects, in line with their cultural matrix, making use of the materials they have here and now.

#### **4. ATIKAMEKW PROJECT OF A GOOD LIFE**

As mentioned in the introduction, the ethnonym that Atikamekw use to refer to themselves is “Nehirowisiw”, which means a being in balance with his or her environment, with his or her surroundings (Ottawa 2014). This harmony was accomplished in relation to their territory in the seminomadic ways of life.

As described in Chapter V, an important feature of Atikamekw culture is the division of the year into six seasons. Each season corresponds to a state of the land, to the availability of resources and thus to specific activities and different campsites (Poirier 2004). As semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers, the Atikamekw used to have a very active way of life. The rhythm and organization of activities were regulated by the relationship with nature and its seasons (Flamand, Ottawa & Labbé 2006).

The seasons and some of their activities are: *Sïkon* (pre-Spring) is the season to make bark baskets and to collect maple sap; *Mirôskamin* (Spring) is the time to go fishing and partridge hunting; *Nîpin* (Summer) is the time to collect birch bark and blueberry; *Takwâkin* (Autumn), moose hunting; *Pîtciqipôn* (pre-Winter) is the time to trap for beavers; *Pipôn* (Winter) is the time to fish under the ice and to make snowshoes (Flamand et al. 2006).

Even though some of those activities are still very important for the Atikamekws – representing privileged moments of cultural transmission and expression – they are practiced for short periods of time in the forest. Life in the reserves, on the other hand, is characterized by unemployment and inactivity. As mentioned in chapter V, most families depend on governmental welfare.

To address this situation, Tapiskwan not only aims to give design workshops to artisans and youth, but it aims, in the long-term, to encourage socio-economic development in Atikamekw communities through the production of crafts. Next year, we have the intention to establish a studio for artisanal printing in the community of Wemotaci where youth and establish artisans can work. Furthermore,



collaborators of Collectif Tapiskwan have the goal of developing a new model of Indigenous entrepreneurship, respectful to Atikamekw values and ways of life. But how could we translate these intentions into actual projects?

#### **4.1 Seasons and activities**

In the Tapiskwan workshops, in July 2015, participants created motifs based on traditional iconography and were introduced to artisanal printing techniques. Most participants manifested a great enthusiasm for their newly acquired skills.

In September 2015, I went to Wemotaci in the company of two colleagues – Solen Roth and Fabio Saldanha – in order to interview the participants and learn their opinions about the Tapiskwan workshops, their suggestions to improve the approach and their desire to continue to take part in the project. We also aimed to learn their opinion and suggestions concerning the possibility of establishing the printing studio in Wemotaci – e.g., how it should work, for how many people, how many days and hours it should be open, how should the production be organized, etc.

In our conversations, the idea that we could open a studio where artisans could work regularly was considered unrealistic. The informants stated that not only there were few job opportunities in the reserve, but when people got a job, they did not keep it for a long time. As soon as people could get employment insurance benefits, they usually quit the job. The informants put this characteristic as a hindrance to the development of any enterprise in Wemotaci.

Then, we came to a realization: the ideal of a good life for Atikamekw is a life with little routine. It is a life in which people intensely practice some activities for short periods of time. It is a diversified lifestyle, in which they move around the territory, camp in different places and practice different activities.

In the semi-nomadic way of life, those ideals were concretely translated in the project of a life divided in 6 seasons, which organized the activities and the movements around the campsites. Those ideals have not yet been translated to the material circumstances of the reserve. Therefore, in order to concretely practice that which they consider as a 'good life', Atikamekws spend time in the forest. **The materials of their life within the reserve are not used to realize their project of a good life.**



**FIGURE 5:** The values that frame people's concrete desires and aspirations correspond to a life of movement and diversity.

In contrast, a good life in many western countries is valued by stability and purchasing power. This ideal is tangibly translated in having a steady job and working from 9 to 5 (at least) in order to have money to go on vacations and buy that which we desire<sup>1</sup>. In the modern culture, well-being has become synonymous with the possibility of individually possessing, showing off and consuming products (Vezzoli & Manzini 2008; Walker 2010). In other words, modern western culture corresponds to another project of a good life.

Life in Atikamekw reserves is marked by poverty and unemployment and, at this moment, Atikamekw communities are not adapted either to the indigenous or to the Western way of life. The jobs that are created in Wemotaci usually follow the models of the Western project. When Atikamekws quit those jobs, the negative stereotypes ascribed to indigenous peoples come to surface – such as idleness, laziness and drug problems. People usually do not grasp that Atikamekw culture corresponds to a project that is very different from the modern Western project.

## 4.2. Finding fulfillment

As I mentioned in chapter V, Canadian institutions have framed the problem of poverty in Indigenous communities as a lack of material resources, and that has

1. No culture is homogeneous. There are Westerners who value a life of diversity and freedom of movement, as there can be Atikamekws who value stability and routine. In this chapter, I am discussing the mainstream projects.

not improved their socioeconomic conditions. Amartya Sen (1999) argues that it would be wrong, and have disastrous consequences, to consider that poverty is merely a question of lack of material resources. For him, ultimately, what the poor are denied is their **human fulfillment**.

One can only find fulfillment in pursuing his or her project of a good life. The project of a culture is what gives direction to actions and choices. Consequently, encouraging socio-economic development and generating income in Atikamekw communities is not simply a matter of creating new opportunities for youth. It is fundamental to transpose those values of movement, diversity and little routine to contemporary endeavors. *What is the kind of contemporary undertaking within the communities that could bring fulfillment to Atikamekws? How could we create new visions for the future in the reserve that embody the values of the seminomadic way of life?*

Our proposition for the Tapiskwan studio is that it would have periods of concentrated activity in which several people would collaborate to create a line of products. For instance, in the winter or in the pre-spring, artisans would get together for two or three intensive weeks of work in order to make products for the Powwow season. In the fall, another group of artisans would work intensively to make products for Holiday season. That being the case, Tapiskwan production phases could become another activity in the Atikamekw calendar.

This proposition was discussed in September 2015 with the two Atikamekw coordinators of the Tapiskwan workshops – Jacques Newashish and Christiane Biroté – who recognized its positive potential. The proposal was also presented to the cultural representative of the Conseil de la Nation Atikamekw, Christian Coocoo, who appreciated it to a great extent. Mr. Coocoo said that very often people try to fit Atikamekws into regular jobs, instead of creating activities and enterprises that are tailored to the Atikamekw way of life.

I believe it is important to allow the same ideals that have directed the Atikamekw way of life in the forest to guide the creation of new ways of life in the reserves – bridging heritage, current material circumstances and desirable ideas for the future. In other words, it is important to seriously consider Atikamekw culture as a project of a good life and not only as a heritage to be preserved and transmitted.



# Conclusion



The main goal of the collaborative project was the development of an approach of design workshops that could address issues that were considered as very significant by Atikamekw artisans, artists and cultural stewards. Those issues were related to the challenges of producing crafts as a source of socio-economic development. The goals of the workshops were to enhance the Atikamekw artisans' creativity and self-confidence, their capacity to represent themselves, and at the same time, increase their appreciation of their own cultural heritage. Were those objectives attained? I believe that we created an effective workshop formula for the specifics of the Atikamekw context.

Nevertheless, some further steps are still needed. As I mentioned in chapter II, designers should act as catalysts in a social innovation program – i.e., getting the ball rolling, but not undertaking the responsibility of keeping it moving (Toomey 2011). At this moment, local stakeholders are not yet capable to keep the ball rolling without my presence, or without the presence of other designers of the Collectif Tapiskwan. My final goal in this project is to enable educators of the three Atikamekw communities to give Tapiskwan workshops independently in the future. And so, the next steps are (1) to produce a toolkit of this methodology to be used by Atikamekw art educators, (2) to train a group of art educators to facilitate Tapiskwan workshops.

Conceiving the approach and methods of Tapiskwan workshops was the first objective of this study. However, I was asked to consider this project as a pilot-

study that would generate knowledge that could be useful to other indigenous communities. Furthermore, I was asked to not tell the story of the Atikamekw who take part of the activities of this study, but to write the story of my work in collaboration with the Atikamekw – what I learned working with them. In regard to these requests, the ultimate goal of this study was to produce knowledge that could inform designers who desire to collaborate with indigenous peoples.

### **Changing materiality and being human**

I mentioned earlier that I recognize myself in this movement of designers who are redirecting their careers in the hopes of tackling complex social problems and “doing good”. And I realize that when I started to work with the Atikamekw I had the same goal of most social designers: to design a solution to atikamekw artisans’ problems. The initial problems were identified by our partners initially: (1) loss of cultural identity and (2) scarce supply of birch bark and moose skin. The solution was designed with the collaboration of several Atikamekw: transposing Atikamekw symbols to different media, creating new images and products based on traditional symbols, etc. With time, I realized that this ‘solution’ was not nearly as important as the capacity of local stakeholders to define and act upon their own projects (as I stated so many times throughout this dissertation). Making projects and acting to materialize them is about being the protagonist of your own life. It is about understanding what happiness means to you, creating a clear idea of that which you desire and allowing this idea to guide your strategic life choices. Oppression and disempowerment involve being subject to other people’s choices.

I came to realize that social design – or design for social innovation – in the context of peoples who suffered assimilation, is not only about creating specific solutions – creating products, methods or services – it is mainly about (re)harmonizing their relationship with their immediate material circumstances.

Design is the power to purposefully act upon and change materiality. The difference between attainable projects and wishful thinking is that attainable projects start here and now, they engage with the current material circumstances in order to change them. Indigenous peoples did not choose to be in these circumstances, many changes in their material life were imposed on them. Acknowledging the current material circumstances – *what is* – does not mean to condone them. It



means to acknowledge your power to transform them – in this sense, purposefully influencing *what might be*.

Here we are talking about a fundamental ability of human beings: the ability to create and change the conditions in which we live. Freire (2005) argues that what makes us humans is exactly this capacity.

The people—aware of their activity and the world in which they are situated, acting in function of the objectives which they propose, having the seat of their decisions located in themselves and in their relations with the world and with others, infusing the world with their creative presence by means of the transformation they effect upon it—unlike animals, not only live but exist; and their existence is historical. (Freire 1970: 98)

Likewise, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that when colonialism denied the capacity of indigenous peoples to create valuable things or to purposefully change their environment, it denied their humanity.

We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the 'arts' of civilization. By lacking such virtues we disqualified ourselves, not just from civilization but from humanity itself. (Smith 1999: 25)

### **Colonialism and development**

UNESCO suggests that we understand cultures as “**trajectories towards the future**” (2009: 199). As a trajectory that links heritage to the ideal of well-being, each culture can be seen as a different pathway of **development** (Bello 2008). ‘Unfolding’ is the original meaning of the term ‘development’, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*. I propose that we understand, in this study, **development as the unfolding of a population’s cultural matrix in the pursuit of the good life as them define it**. Cultural diversity represents numerous different trajectories or pathways.

I believe the essence of colonialism is the idea that only one trajectory is possible. The Western civilization was idealized as the evolutionary destiny of humanity, the only and universal pathway of development. The project that drove this belief is usually named as ‘**modernity**’ (Smith 1999). In this worldview, humanity was moving, in a linear and evolutionary process, from a primitive or traditional level to an advanced and modern level. The ‘primitive’ ways of life were seen as an aberration

that needed to be eradicated, and the surviving savages needed to be civilized. The term ‘development’ became a synonym of following the modern project – and the primitives needed ‘help’ to catch up<sup>1</sup> (Escobar 2012; Verhelst & Tyndale 2002).

John Law (2011) named this worldview and practices as an ‘One-World world’. Escobar describes the ‘One-World world’ (OWW):

A crucial moment in the emergence of such practices was the Conquest of America, which some consider the point of origin of our current modern/colonial world system. Perhaps the most central feature of the One-World project has been a twofold ontological divide: a particular way of separating humans from nature; and the distinction and boundary policing between those who function within the OWW from those who insist on other ways of worlding. (Escobar 2015: 14)

Decolonization can have numerous different and valuable meanings. I chose to work with one specific meaning: the coexistence of multiple trajectories. Escobar (2015) argues that we are in a transition, from the OWW, toward ‘a world in which many worlds fit’<sup>2</sup> – a *pluriverse*. I argue that, to transition towards a *pluriverse*, we need to seriously consider *culture as a project*. Development is not only about the trajectory of the modern project, multiple collective projects can be manifest in a world in which many worlds fit.

Making and realizing your own individual and collective projects is essential in order to have the seat of your decisions located in yourself – in other words, to be able to make strategic choices – and not be subject to choices and projects of the dominant society. And so, I believe that the ultimate goal of social designers should be **to support the capacity of local people to develop along their own pathways, in line with their cultural matrix, in pursuit of the good life as that culture defines it.**

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1. The forms given to this ‘help’ were numerous. In the case of the Atikamekw, a key ‘help’ to integrate them in the ‘good’ ways of life was the residential school system. A few months ago, I had a heartbreaking conversation with a woman who went to a residential school. She told me that her mother was a beautiful woman who sported a long lustrous mane. Her mother used to take special care of her girl’s hair, that was an expression of their love. When she was sent to the residential school, her head was shaved at her arrival. That was only the beginning of the abuses, but it was a shock that deeply marked her: how could something that she loved so dearly, that defined who she was, be seen as filthy?

2. ‘A world where many worlds fit’ is a Zapatista dictum (Escobar 2015).

**Further research**

One clear limitation of this study is that I conclude that social design is about enhancing the capacity of people to create and act upon their own projects, but the actions of this study, Tapiskwan workshops, were not about it. In the Tapiskwan workshops, participants acted upon projects proposed by the design team. I did not study the participants' projects, I only proposed that, by developing their capacity to design, we could enhance the capacity to create and realize projects.

This limitation does not mean that the goals of Tapiskwan workshops are not important, on the contrary. Revealing and making use of the hidden resources of a community, fostering self-confidence and self-esteem, nurturing intergenerational dialogue, creating contemporary representations of the Atikamekw Nation, identifying new opportunities for action, and so on – they are all valuable outcomes that might enable people to carry on their own projects.

I see, however, the Tapiskwan approach as training wheels. At some point, participants would have to create their own projects. Therefore, I realized that we have to create another methodology, a second step, that would support the participants' ideas to improve their own community – giving shape to these ideas as attainable projects and enabling them to act upon the material circumstances of the reserve. Therefore, my conclusion is an opening for further research and action.

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