



Retail Therapy

(or the role of design in the souvenir industry)

Abstract

Cultures from around the world are nowadays interpreted through the aesthetic of products and images. Ensuring the authenticity of such language is important for encouraging cross-cultural understanding, essential in achieving sustainable development in emerging countries.

The notion of branding has shifted in recent years. Some studies show that perceptions of environmental, ethical and social responsibility are the fastest growing contributors to consumer brand value. If designed and branded intelligently, souvenir products could become the perfect medium for communicating cross-cultural values worldwide.

Long before souvenirs actually became an industry they might have been considered as more culturally relevant. The souvenir industry has emerged over a century ago and yet it has hardly been challenged in the past decades. It seems that the conception of souvenir products would benefit from a design-integrated approach, for example through place branding strategies and a deeper understanding of local visual identities. Very often, souvenirs are expected to be affordable, kitsch and poor in aesthetic detail. Yet, shouldn't they be the inspiring evidence of a travel experience that could otherwise be forgotten?

Why can souvenir products not be more grounded in their local environment and be less superficial? Shouldn't local creators play a role in redefining souvenir items?

Some of the main issues currently at stake are:

- The use of local capacities and creative input to develop more genuine local identity instead of superficial imagery;
- The inequality between developed countries and those in transition concerning the evolution of cultural identities;
- A clash of opinions about the relationship between cultural preservation and contemporary identity; notably relating to the use of design and technology.

This research is a study and experiment with retail display design in the tourism industry, notably souvenir shops, hotels or airports. Its aim is to propose solutions that would help emerging places to develop their own design culture and build their identity through design strategies. This project is about cultural innovation requiring new tastes and behaviors. Its goal is to socially, economically and culturally benefit local communities in the context of globalization. What does it take to reinvent the image or redefine the spirit of a place? Is it possible to build a successful city/country brand without falling into clichés by collaborating with local creators? How can the exercise of branding adapt to different cultures? What does local identity mean in a globalizing world? How can traditional practices reinvent themselves through design and new technologies?

1. Introduction – From 20th to 21st century consumer experience

‘Retail therapy is shopping with the primary purpose of improving the buyer’s mood or disposition.’ (Oxford Online Dictionary)

The bold statement ‘I shop therefore I am’ by American artist Barbara Kruger still remains a relevant modern twist to Descartes’ ‘I think therefore I am’. The 20th century saw the birth of a consumer experience shaped around brand names and excessive consumption, particularly in Western societies. It has been brilliantly questioned throughout pop culture:

‘When you think about it, department stores are kind of like museums.’ (Warhol)

Barbara Kruger’s work was recently re-introduced, but this time in the retail environment, by the London department store Selfridges during its January 2007 sales. Inside the shopping fortress, hysterical crowds were desperately pushing through escalators to reach their target designer item at a reduced price whilst posters silently screaming “Buy me I will change your

life” were hanging from the ceiling.

Some figures are uncanny. We live in a divided world where 90% of global wealth is shared by only 10% of the world’s population. Consumer behaviour is often criticized and one question remains: Can consumption be turned into a socially positive rather than purely greedy experience? Shopping and retail participate very importantly in privileged people’s lives but they could be reinvented to benefit a wider range of the world’s population, not only economically, but also socially and culturally. Why not conceive a new generation of retail therapy that is ethical, inclusive and proposes solutions towards social change? Strangely, the possibility to cure and promote world cultures through design and retail seems to exist.

The 21st century global market has already created change within the shopping experience. The availability of products has increased and it is notable that a majority of these products are now thoroughly processed through design. Due to the expansion of industrial production in Asia, 21st century designed products have become more affordable and been democratized compared to those in the 20th century which widely remained exclusive. There is an ever increasing design

input in a range of product families including clothing, furniture, books, electronics, transportation, etc. But the negative effects of mass production are also inevitable. Globalization is a continuous battle between creativity and conformity that puts certain local cultural identities in ‘danger’ – more particularly in the developing world. Just as people talk about environmental sustainability, it is also fundamental to consider the cultural sustainability of the world through diversity.

Consumers have changed and are continuously changing. The industrial multiplication of images and products has transformed the perception of individuals around the world. People have become used to high design standards and also play a fundamental role when it comes to shaping new trends. Trendwatching, an independent consumer trends firm, coined the term ‘Customer-Made’ to describe this phenomenon:

‘From a business and innovation angle, we’d like to argue that the CUSTOMER-MADE trend, co-creating with your customers, is the most important one to watch. Not because everything has to or will be co-created in the future, but because tapping into the collective experiences, skills and ingenuity of hundreds of

millions of consumers around the world is a complete departure from the inward looking, producer- versus-consumer innovation model so common to corporations around the world.’ (Trendwatching online 2006)

The world needs to move towards a more intelligent form of consumption where the greater participation of individuals and societies contributes to a more diversified commercial culture as opposed to a homogeneous one. Instead of making cultural sustainability a form of resistance, it should be absorbed into mainstream consumer culture in order to trigger widespread cross-cultural transformations.

2. Retail culture vs. cultural retail

Souvenirs are products specifically designed to embody a local or national cultural identity and yet, as a result of poor or non-existing design intervention, they are often tacky and kitsch.

‘Everywhere in the minutiae of our material culture, we encounter reminders of our availability of authentic experiences at other times and in other

places. Pictures of important sights, moments and men appear on ashtrays depicting of Learning Tower of Pisa, the Capitol, the face of Richard Nixon. Names and labels appear on pencils stamped "Disneyland", "Property of the State Department", and the like (...). In addition to matchbooks, postcards, pencils and ashtrays that carry the name and/or the picture of a sight, there are the less common items such as touristic dish towels and dust cloths overprinted with drawings (...). These are not intended to serve their original purposes, but are fixed instead so they can be hung on kitchen walls.' (MacCann 1999: 148)

Souvenirs also seem to have been locked in a very rigid and conventional market where they have ultimately frozen in time and lost all cultural relevance. They still manage to participate in the modern concept of tourism and try to answer the needs triggered by different travel markets for different kinds of travelers.

The modern tourist resembles the travellers and explorers of times past but with a distinct evolution. They are looking to get in depth knowledge of a location through cultural engagement, encounters with nature, spiritual experiences or by meeting with the locals. They seek personal growth, the

acquisition of knowledge or wisdom and a deeper understanding of the world.

The purchase of souvenirs and the tourist has evolved since ancient times. Today the modern traveller can be divided into three categories of explorer. The first category is the tourist that is new to a society and getting to know the destination.

The first time travellers usually buy cheap souvenirs that are commercially symbolic of the place visited. They show the typical characteristics of mass tourists and seek cheap, exotic stereotypes to purchase.

The second type of visitor is more familiar with the destination because of various trips. This group seeks "authentic" art forms, they will visit production places and artisans, pay more attention to detail and buy items that reflect their growing knowledge of a place. Importantly they try to maintain an identity apart from 'tourists' and usually spend more time and money.

The third type of modern explorer has much more experience with the destination. They actively seek out experiences to deepen their knowledge, participate in local life and are more

local in nature. They demonstrate an appreciation for the ordinary and commonplace rather than the exotic or extraordinary. Their consumption patterns are usually the same as locals.

One challenge to be taken by designers would be to help create an all-inclusive souvenir industry that could appeal to different types of travellers by making affordable products that are also culturally interesting and original by design. Beyond museum stores, there are currently blurring boundaries between the world of shopping and that of the arts, leading to a stronger link between retail and culture. There exist new terms like department store curators (or shop curators) who act as cultural advisors in the retail industry. Conventional museums are today challenged by new approaches and definitions coming from the retail environment. The interest here lies in the positive interaction between two worlds, the first one being culture and the other commerce. Both worlds have changed and evolved. They are now more flexible, willing to open up barriers and gain new potential in their ability to surprise.

'(...) one of the main differences between curating in a public institution or a retail environment is that when people visit a museum they already

have it programmed into their minds that they are going to see art – they think they know what they are going to experience. This isn't the case with (department stores), anything artistic is unexpected.' (Von Hase 2007: 22)

Design can play a major role in bridging the gap between art and commerce as it is capable of transforming the visual heritage of people and places into commercial currency.

This new approach to retailing could create a consumption pattern in which individuals will seek more culturally relevant products because he/she will become more conditioned and educated about the subject. The consumer will therefore indirectly influence the conception and design of products as well as challenge them. Souvenir objects should naturally be part of this process and design the methodology to create appealing products.

A magazine article recently mentioned that traditional Chinese art does not discern between art and design and that in other places such as India, Africa and the Far East, craftsmanship is highly respected and intrinsic to the culture. In this context, would design be needed as an 'in-between' methodology to introduce fields such as crafts or fine arts into the retail environment? Perhaps it can help more

countries around the world find new ways of promoting their local culture on a global market scale and also make them successfully process traditional skills through contemporary creative practices.

3. Designed products + place branding = souvenirs

‘Brand is a useful way to help governments understand the value and complexity of external reputation and internal cohesion (...) the strategic pillars of nation branding are: connecting policy, culture, people, products and tourism in a joint strategy, a coherent approach to short, medium and long-term planning (...) honesty, transparency and inclusion, clarity of vision, and lastly, courage.’ (Ollins 2006)

Souvenirs are odd cross-cultural communication tools which should naturally be placed in the context of place branding. They can be used as gifts by government officials who are willing to share and promote their native culture with someone from a different part of the world or can be sold to commemorate a national event (e.g. Olympic Games). However it is too often that souvenir gifts tend to

lose their symbolic and cultural value. Without design leadership souvenir products are deprived of cultural potential and struggle to reflect a clear identity once processed through the global consumer market.

Even though souvenirs still manage to sell, they have disappointed many consumers who have since turned to brandnames for ‘better-option’ souvenir gifts. In Britain and around the world, Paul Smith is famous for reflecting a quirky image of the traditional English gentleman. His brand has helped shape a creative image of Britain using design as a serious component for popularity: the combination of fashion design with strong corporate identity (and environmental retail design) was key to his success.

‘As with many of fashion’s most successful brands, Smith’s aesthetic represents a simple idea: that is, classic with a twist (...) Most notable was the “Englishness” of his designs, and a certain modesty and humour that served him extremely well.’ (The Independent 2006: 3-4)

In many ways, Paul Smith stores around the world sell British souvenir products as they promote a certain vision of ‘Britishness’. He is a good model for ‘cultural retail’ and shows a potential to

be applied outside of the luxury market industry.

Many products from the post-industrial era have gradually become rootless. They are conceived in one place, produced in another and sold yet elsewhere. This makes it difficult for them to sustain a focused identity unless they create a visual impact. One successful exception is the Japanese retail store Muji, a company who has managed to promote Japanese culture and lifestyle by focusing on design. It is contradictory that the original name “Mujirushi Ryohin” means “brand free” as Muji has become hugely popular as a ‘non-brand brand’ in many countries of the world. The minimal and neutral designs are widely recognized and associated to a rather genuine perception of Japanese identity. By embodying Japanese aesthetic and functionality in its products, Muji has become a symbol of Japanese culture and lifestyle.

Elsewhere, there are tendencies reversing and resisting the effects of mass production and as concerns for sustainable development are widely spreading the expectations of consumers around the world are changing. They are slowly moving towards a new approach where instead of being part of the problem they want to be part

of the solution. Their perceptions of environmental, ethical and social responsibility are the fastest growing contributors to consumer brand value.

‘The (Still) Made Here trend encompasses new and enduring manufacturers and purveyors of the local. In a world that is seemingly ruled by globalization, mass production and the ‘cheapest of the cheapest’, a growing number of consumers are seeking out the local, and thereby the authentic, the stories, the co-friendly and the obscure.’ (Trendwatching online 2007)

By transforming souvenirs along those lines and making them more culturally and socially relevant, places around the world will improve their communication strategies and also be capable of developing stronger reputation. Whether cheap or expensive, products have the potential of becoming interesting souvenirs as long as they are injected some meaning, originality and authenticity.

4. Souvenirs made in transit

In 2006, a project called ‘Made in Nigeria’ involved students at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, and the Royal College of Art in London.

This 10-day workshop, supervised by Lagos sculptor Olu Amoda and British designer Tom Dixon, challenged the participants to prototype products that reflected the local features of Nigeria but also had export potential. One of the aims was to raise awareness of the importance of design in preserving indigenous craft skills through design application. It was also an eye opener for London designers to realize the needs for design in a developing country:

‘Lagos was positively amazing. My eyes have been opened completely. Design all seem so much more real there; the needs all too apparent, and greater than ours.’ (Lamb 2006: 14)

Another project called ‘Souvenirs’ was launched by the British Council in 2005. It invited young designers in Moscow to rethink the local souvenir industry and asked them to create a new generation of souvenir products. In three days, they came up with fun products such as an interactive customizable guidebook or wooden blocks printed with the Cyrillic alphabet.

‘Designers often have unusual ways of commemorating visits – photos of drugstore signs, dustbin or doorbells, collection of chocolate wrappers, restaurant receipts or bus tickets. This compulsive garnering of unofficial but

pregnant souvenirs has potential to be transformed into real ones’ (British Council 2006: 3)

The world is more accessible today than ever. The possibility to travel multiplies stories and possibilities. Souvenirs are truly relevant in this travel/transit context because they are the perfect medium to communicate and promote different world cultures in between travel destinations. They often are the sole extension of a place and its people. It is an entire lucrative industry that could be regenerated in both developed and developing countries and that could see new forms of cooperation emerge amongst designers worldwide.

‘Neuroscientists tell us that human brains search for meaning and narrative in everything – even when there is none. If we are genetically driven to story-making, what tales matter in business and why? How do we shape the stories that shape us? How do stories drive identity and behaviour in the marketplace the workplace and beyond?’ (Spencer)

Within the global travel system, identities are merging and changing as collaborative efforts amongst designers increase. Such efforts can help develop new realms of practice in the framework of sustainable tourism

and inspiring products/stories could emerge through the discovery and creative interpretation of each other’s culture.

5. Some suggestions of souvenir retail design

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the growth of corporate responsibility and transformations in corporate/consumer mentalities. Businesses are valuable partners to consider in relationship to design and culture because they have the capacity to reach out and introduce new ways of thinking. Merging those new corporate behaviours with cultural policies established by governments might be a sustainable solution to support local creation, originality and authenticity.

Here are three new formats of souvenir retail businesses that can contribute to the promotion of local cultures:

First, the ‘MICRO’ format: a vending machine, filled with small souvenir products, available anywhere at any time. It offers affordable yet genuine products made by local creators, and also aims to challenge cultural diversity: instead of selling products from one region, it offers a compilation

of popular design/crafts items from around the world. These qualities make the Micro a potential educational device that would encourage people to discover new cultures and peoples.

Secondly, the ‘NOMAD’, a souvenir pop-up retail store. It is not quite the ice cream van of souvenirs but almost. It allows people from non-urban areas to sell their products that would otherwise not be sold in cities. It also travels to consumers from isolated neighborhoods. Ideal for low budget businesses, its ephemeral quality makes it an event-like store which can reinvent itself every other season.

Last but not least, the ‘HYBRID’: a modular cultural retail space that can fit in large or medium transit spaces, notably airports, hotels and restaurants. It sells affordable and luxury designed products that people will actually want to buy and keep.

Conclusion – Design and cultural sustainability

‘(...) at any rate, design is never a job, it is a way of looking at the world and changing it.’ (Papanek 1971-1973: 279)

In recent years, design has become an international phenomenon affecting an increasing number of countries from the developing world and designers are playing more important roles towards cultural and sustainable development. India, China, South Africa and Brazil are successful examples of places where design is believed to be an effective methodology and tool for social improvement.

The beauty of design is that it is conceived around societies and individuals. It affects cultural identity, people's behaviour, their country's economy, social development and environmental sustainability. Design encompasses a variety of disciplines. It is compatible with traditional forms of culture and can be adapted in different social contexts.

We should not forget that design must communicate values, including cultural ones. To that end we must:

- Network to demonstrate the value of design for cultural development
- Stimulate cultural diversity through design by encouraging inter-disciplinarity and multiculturalism within design
- Empower designers and craftsmen worldwide by introducing them in influential areas (both public and

private)

Design is not an insular professional activity. Its strength is its flexibility and ability to blend in a variety of environments as well as its capacity to shape new ways of seeing and new cultural patterns.

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