Endearing (Re) Encounters: Participatory Design in a Latin-American popular context.

David de los Reyes
dde@uniandes.edu.co
Universidad de los Andes, Colombia
Departamento de Diseño

Andrea Botero
andrea.botero@aalto.fi
Aalto University, Finland
School of Arts, Design and Architecture

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the invitation to embrace new territories by proposing a set of conceptual and methodological strategies to expand the PD toolkit when working within ‘popular cultures’. On the basis of PD research interventions in rural and urban popular contexts in Colombia, we reflect on experiences of designing in these territories, so far not very explored by the PD community. Set within a deeply unequal and hybrid society, PD efforts find in Colombian popular culture an opportunity for encounter and connection turning the design project into an ad hoc community able to trigger change.

Author Keywords
Communities, Developing countries, Tools, Participation, Tradition and transcendence.

INTRODUCTION
Having its roots in Scandinavian countries in the 70’s, Participatory Design (PD) community has been instrumental in bringing to the forefront of design research and practices the imperatives, challenges and benefits of open design processes that empower people. During the last decades the field has experimented and developed theoretical and practical tools to deal with issues of participation and power, democracy, involvement of tacit knowledge and skills as they relate to a design process (for overviews see e.g.: Bødker, Kensing, Simonsen, 2004; Greembaum & Kyng, 1991).

So far these efforts have been mostly reflected and tested in workplace contexts located in what is often referred to as the ‘developed’ or ‘first world’. In the last years though, there has been increasing interest in understanding participatory design efforts in other everyday life contexts and public spheres (Björvgvinsson et al, 2010), services (Blomberg, 2009); as well as in new frontiers such as those labeled as ‘developing world’ (Dearden et al, 2008; Oyugi, 2008) or multicultural environments (Winschiers, 2006). This has also prompt reflections on participation from other perspectives than those of mainstream western tradition (e.g.: Winschiers-Theophilus, 2010).

Parallel to these movements within PD, there are other contributions that arise with the general interest to understand the benefits of bringing a design approach to bear on complex and pressing social realities. Realities which are found in all corners of the world and across sectors; ranging from environmental sustainability, to alleviating poverty, social distress, cultural erosion and so on. Around these efforts, social innovation (Mulgan et al, 2010), design for the base of the pyramid (Whitney & Kelkar, 2004) design for emerging markets (Kandchar et al, 2009) and social design (Tönkwise, 2011); have been among the many labels used to denote areas for design action beyond pure commercial contexts.

Our present efforts aim to contribute to this interest in new territories of participation, and new framings of design activity by exploring and proposing a set of conceptual strategies and practical tools to expand the PD toolkit for interventions within ‘popular’ culture. The notion of popular culture we refer has been made visible in fields such as Cultural Studies (CS). As a response to hierarchical assumptions of how culture is produced, circulated and consumed, CS has located audiences and popular culture as key actors and consumption as a legitimate site of cultural production (see e.g. Escobar, 1994, García, 1989a). It should be noted that in Latin America the term ‘popular culture’ refers to the cultural practices of subordinate groups, and not to ‘mass culture’ in general, like it is the case for example in the United States. The reflections and proposals are based on the experiences of the Estudio 7: Diseño Popular (Studio 7: Popular Design), an ongoing practical design research course at the ‘Los Andes’ University in Bogotá, Colombia that has run since 2010. In the studio design students, teachers and collaborating communities engage in design interventions, set up in rural and urban ‘popular’ contexts surrounding Bogotá. The results of the interventions made in the studio are not thought only in terms of products, but include also service concepts, information and communication structures, tactics and strategies, cultural events and new social forms of organization, amongst others.

In the following, we will introduce aspects of the approach to popular cultures we have used in order to break prejudices and design practices. We recount some of the concrete engagements that the course has produced and present some of the tools and concepts we have found useful throughout the last years. To close we reflect on some of the opportunities and limitations these types of efforts entail.
ESTUDIO POPULAR: EXPLORATIONS AROUND POPULAR CULTURE

Some notes around the conceptual framework
García Canclini has synthesized culture as “the set of processes where the significance of social structures is drawn, reproduced and transformed by symbolic operations” (1989b, p. 25). With this in mind ‘popular culture’ is not necessarily something authentic and untouched, derived from tradition (García, 1989a). Instead, popular culture should be considered leaving folkloric idealism and also political populism; understanding it as a heterogeneous staging, a performativity (Yúdice, 2008) seems to be a more honest position.

To elaborate this, we take the concept of articulation, in the twofold sense of expression, and to initiate temporary connections. Popular culture can be seen as a space of meaning where articulation originates from a horizontal plane. If the vertical plane reinforces stratification and the asymmetries from hegemonic discourse, the popular is constructed from the emergence of horizontal relationships and flows. Thus, popular culture is an arena of conflict between resistance and incorporation. It is not either imposed or authentic, but rather equilibrium by compromise (Storey, 2009). Thereby the popular refers here to an invention process aimed at the present. This is done by a complex hybridization, which penetrates all classes, ethnic and national boundaries (Escobar, 1996). In other words, a creative process and a meeting place with its own ways of building languages and symbols.

This invention process involves us as cultural actors, not only as individuals making utilitarian decisions. Hence our starting premise has been that of being all Colombians, citizens of the same region. As such we assume a substrate of affinity and common cultural identity that binds designers and members of communities, albeit we recognize some of the nuances at play. By linking the design efforts to territories of popular culture we want to probe on the possibility of design interventions as spaces of re-encounter and creativity, within complexity and inequality. This to counter the assumption of segregation, compartmentalization and/or of hegemonic postures that, in our opinion, other starting points such as ‘development’, ‘emerging markets’ or ‘base of the pyramid’ suggest.

When starting to work, students scan a group of cases, using a similar set of tools to collect and analyze data. We call it Assembling Panoramas. Instead of each group researching their own case, they contribute with a piece of a landscape illustrating a cultural domain: work, leisure, family, beliefs, etc. The comparative analysis brings forward the dynamics of the whole, its ‘Panorama’ and the tension between top-down forces –hegemonic, asymmetrical-, and bottom-up actions, -emergent, defiant-, the role and domestication of nature; aesthetic sensibilities but also identity and expression. Besides being a way to qualitatively study the social fabric in an agile manner, its main function has been to afford a forum where sensitivities meet (both of the students and of collaborating communities) and information flows between participants as the panorama is being assembled.

The results of the Panorama are distilled in and visualized in the studio space, using cards. Cards are built following two interweaved strategies: First, an analytic and divergent one, using the POINTS framework -problems, opportunities, insights, necessities and themes- (Engine Group, 2008). Secondly, a synthetic and convergent one that generates quick design ideas. A crucial rule is that everyone contributes to all cases analysis and ideation, regardless of their point of departure. Under this umbrella dissimilar actors and their knowledge engage in dialogue.

The problem-setting phase takes shape in a pool of projects. Clouds of analysis cards and quick ideas are used to outline project proposals to be validated with the problem owners. All projects belong to the group and new collaborations can spark around promising issues. The next steps include setting up calculated accidents in the form of prototypes, to expose knowledge we do not have and whose existence we ignore. As already shown by PD, prototypes crafted as experiments, are useful to understand the contact between context, ideas and subjectivities involved. In this context it has also proved an excellent way to incorporate formalized and tacit knowledge, canonized and profane. When jointly elaborating proposals we have found useful frameworks like ‘enabling solutions’ (as coined by Manzini et al 2004) and ‘Grow of Inclusive Markets’ (PNUD, 2010) to identify tangible and intangible elements that could enable participants to build on their own resources and scale up practices. As the proposals are developed, students commit themselves to produce a how-to manual for the communities. The manual includes the complete process and the results, as a reflective guide to iterate successively.

Processes do not start with a ‘participatory’ framework, as students first question the separation and symbolic boundaries perceived between a private-owned university and vulnerable communities. It is clear that at present the initiative begins from the studio itself, so the students must ‘sell’ their ideas and justify to the communities any intervention. What is also clear is that successful experiences are those that grow to become truly spaces of encounter through participation. Thus, re-encounters must be gradually built upon trust and dialogue. As the pool of projects grows and the network of collaborators strengthens we hope to support initiatives that are brought directly by the communities to the studio. In the following we will introduce some of the themes that have emerged in these re-encounters. The following examples are amongst those that have been more successful in mobilizing the communities and their imagination, and thus deemed viable to reach implementation stage.

Explorations:

Saving strategies in informal street vending: Street vendors are a popular sight in Bogota, where limited employment opportunities set the stage for the informal economy’s big role. This engagement started by collecting and socializing success stories from ‘popular’ entrepreneurs in this territory, who overcame poverty traps by developing small saving and investment strategies. Collaboration with the vendors made clear that a central part of the problem was to build trust and reduce
the information costs that prevent access to financial services. Thus key aspects of the intervention were to 1) collectively unveil and prototype incentives to build upon: collective action, solidarity, achievable goals and humour and 2) design mechanisms for making the incentives visible for all the stakeholders. The material was turned into building blocks for a participatory savings service platform that works also as an education strategy. The concept was called ‘Pa’lante’ (slang for ‘go forward!’). It basically proposes that private sector, local government and civil society interests can convene and balance around small self-organized groups of the street vendors community. If accompanied through a process of collective savings, those groups could indeed move forward. The savings could be gathered from the sale of privately subsidized products that have a label recognized by the supporting civil society; local government encourage and supervises the cooperation between actors. Unlike strategies centered on microcredit, ‘Pa’lante’ emphasizes thrift values sustained by social capital. (Catalina Alzate’s final degree project, built upon a previous work in the course with María Paula Barón y Patricia Fernández de Castro).

Low-impact agriculture in nature reserves: Traditional top-down environmental management is the typical strategy followed in Colombian natural reserves. Because it imposes conservation actions that unfortunately leave little livelihood opportunities to peasants communities near the reserve, it has been largely considered a failure. In here work was done with a peasant community and parts of the administration (notably the park rangers who are also part of the local community) of a natural reserve near Bogotá. By casting the net wide, also some new actors were identified and brought. The result of the interactions was a concept for an alternative arrangement and business model for low-impact agriculture in fragile ecosystems. The idea is simple, orchids, the national flower, are planted and taken care by the communities in native oaks, and marketed under the auspices of a brand focused on the conservation of the reserve. The brand (called Epíflora), will be owned by a cooperative integrated by members of the community, that also builds a strategic alliance with a start-up biotech company (currently developing the orchid seeds) and the natural reserve. (Work of Andrea Gutierrez, Marcela Lukauskis and Javier Vargas).

Circulating cosmetics: home kitchens as productive assets. There is a largely unrecognized, but pervasive, do-it-yourself (DIY) practice of many work-at-home mothers in Bogotá, who engage as hobbyist in homemade cosmetics. This involves traditional medicine, syncretic new age recipes but also product counterfeiting. The context of such practices are usually low education, caring of children and extended family, strong network of neighbours, and a cherished culture of homemade crafts and gifts. By collaborating with some of these women, during the intervention ideas to turn their home kitchens into productive assets were developed. In concrete ‘Damarosa’ (Lady-rose) a DIY lotion and fragrances franchise was sketched to illustrate how these businesswomen could produce and bottle lotions and fragrances using their kitchens and distribute and sell them though their network of friends and acquaintances in more streamlined and organized way. Besides the brand franchise there would also be a communal organization supplying ingredients, bottles, communication material, training and support. (Work of Julián David Pérez, Andrea Beltrán and María Antonia Echeverri).

We are what we drink. ‘Chicha’ is a fermented corn beverage of pre-Columbian origin. During the nineteenth century the beverage was declared illegal and un-healthy and it was soon replaced by commercial beer. Chicha barely survived, however it became a synonym of cultural resistance that has made a shy come back in the last decades. Today, the founding neighbourhood in Bogotá, called ‘El Chorro de Quevedo’, offers traditional ‘chicha’ and new variants. Work with the brewers in the neighbourhood made visible the desire to disseminate and extend their urban subculture to other spaces of the city. A proposal was developed to create ‘Chorro al Parque’ a nomadic festival that, like a circus, uses a convoy of trailers and occupies small parks around the city. The festival will offer varieties of ‘chicha’, musical performances, storytelling and juggling. (Work of María Claudia Pico and Tatiana George).

DISCUSSION
Looking back at these experiences, we see several underlying principles that link them together: 1) Goals are framed and reframed at the intersection of participants’ perspectives; designers take part as co-owners of the problem, since a common belonging is acknowledged. 2) Equally or even more important than problem solving, the purpose of the interventions is to mobilize the collective capabilities and create social and cultural capital enrichment. 3) Bricolage of pre-existing solutions, building on top of what there is and what has been made. 4) Amplify stakeholders’ engagement by locating and making visible proper incentives and strengthening social capital. 5) Mostly horizontal -and dense- relations are established amongst the actors, to avoid dependency, increase solution resiliency and balancing of interests. 6) Interventions are staged as part of the performativity of the actors, through humor, playfulness and craftsmanship. 7) Innovation does not come necessarily from pursuing novelty; it can as well emerge from familiarity.

On the basis of these common principles, we might argue that successful re-encounters are those that make the design project an ad-hoc community, one that summons dissimilar actors and is capable to trigger change. We suggest that the guiding thread of the process could be conceptualized into four stages: empathize, reencounter, build and activate. Empathize relates to finding shared values and sensibilities around mutual engagements as citizens. Articulation allows new expressions hybridizations- of identities, an exploration of spaces were meaning and dialogue can spark. Aesthetics and ethics emerge and bind in this scenery. Reencountering makes visible the sediment of collective agency where learning and achievement stories are seeds of solutions. The proposals are based in the capabilities of the actors: values, skills and cognitive abilities are resources to be
collected and assembled into the solution. But capabilities cannot be alienated from individuals, so is also a celebration of the gathering of dissimilar actors reunited by the commitment to the challenge at hand. Build refers to the process of bricolage and articulation of pre-existing capacities, institutions and infrastructures, synthesized in a coherent solution, rooted in the territory and the actors’ practices. This merges a strategic approach with day-to-day negotiations and transactions. Activate is to implement the proposal so it resonates with the values and preferences of the actors, reorganizes existing arrangements and generate virtuous circles.

Besides an endearing re-encountering and a PD process, projects have been a learning and empowerment experience has much to offer to the development of PD. To move forward we need to strengthen the relationship with external allies and collaborators and work more on building a pool of projects.

CONCLUSIONS
Our aim is to reflect on the pertinence of the approach used, to help us navigate into future explorations. Thus we must recognize that the conceptual framework of popular culture is not free of risk. In one hand, culture might be viewed and managed as a capital or a resource. This increases the danger of exploitation of “immaterial” labor (e.g. the way of life of an ethnic group sold as an attraction for tourism) leading to the transformation of designers into managers of expropriation, carried out disguised as work ‘focused on the community’ (Yúdice, 2008). On the other, aesthetics and the idea of community, swiftly withdrawn of transcendence, can be retrofitted to the formulation of a political and cultural alternative to domination. Nevertheless, we also see that within the framework of popular culture design might become useful –even necessary- in terms of performativity; if it assembles and constitutes a unity of the diverse. In many cases we have seen how concrete resources and networks to realize the proposals have been identified and could be recruited, we are optimists. By re-opening to the creation of cultural manifestations, true vocation of the discipline, the practitioner is re-situated again as a community member, sharing its joys and suffering shortcomings not limited to the economic sphere. Popular culture is a local, uneven public sphere, crossed by the challenge of equipping ourselves with material, symbolic, intellectual, social and environmental commons to which PD should contribute. Conversely the hybrid nature of Latin America’s popular cultures and experiences has much to offer to the development of PD practices. We hope our work is a contribution towards these goals.

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REFERENCES