

# Letters South of (Nordic) Design.

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# LETTERS SOUTH OF (NORDIC) DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

The following text is an e-mail exchange between colleagues, countrymen and friends – one located in Brussels (Belgium) and the other in Bogotá (Colombia) – and it is presented as an *epistolary article*. Different to traditional academic articles, there is no initial hypothesis proven throughout the text, but a narrative emerging from the conversation among peers. We started from the topic (*design + power*) and questions proposed for the 2017 edition of NORDES; we could say that, paradoxically, we head north in a southbound conversation that involves decoloniality, deschooling, practices of *designs with other names* and even the film *Ratatouille*.

## LETTERS

Brussels, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Alfredo,

I write to you with certain thoughts and questions regarding the upcoming NORDES conference, which I would like to discuss with you. I think your explorations with *Design of the South* (or *designs of the souths*) might offer a valuable perspective on these issues. For starters, the name of the conference is an invitation to problematization: *Nordic Design Research Conference*. If well I understand that “Nordic” refers to a geographical location, as it brings together design researchers across Scandinavia, I feel the name is being embraced without ‘a pinch of salt’. However Nordic researchers might be considered pioneers in participatory (western) design practices for the last 40 years, I would like to see more self-critique and

acknowledgement of the conditions that allowed them to innovate in such practices. Almost 35 years ago, our countryman Gabriel García Márquez received in Stockholm the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his acceptance speech, entitled *The Solitude of Latin America*, he says: “it is understandable that the rational talents on this side of the world [Europe], exalted in the contemplation of their own cultures, should have found themselves without valid means to interpret us” (García Márquez, 1982). Similarly, today I see Scandinavians exalted in the contemplation of their participatory and collaborative design practices, yet staying short in understanding other types of designs and critically analysing the emergence of their own practices. Things get ever more complicated when mentioning this year’s conference theme: “design + power”. It troubles me, again, the relation to the ‘north’: ¿don’t you think it’s rather cynical to propose discussions about power from a north without self-critique? It makes me think of a recent public debate in The Netherlands, triggered by a contest that invited designers to propose solutions to the so-called refugee crisis (*Refugee Challenge*). In a critical article, Dutch graphic designer Ruben Pater (2016) suggested that the contest would not mitigate the effects of a “crisis [that] is pretty much designed” – I would add ‘from a northern perspective’. With this, Pater suggested that designers are partners in crime in the construction of the systems that have caused this crisis and proposing ‘solutions’ that don’t challenge the structural conditions of such systems is superfluous. Coming back to NORDES; it would be important, then, to know if the allusion to “power” includes a critique to the power relations of the global north that they represent, together with its different design manifestations.

Another worrisome issue for me is the ambiguity in the use of the word ‘power’; I personally frame it in a perspective close to Holloway (2002), who suggests the existence of a ‘power over’ and a ‘power to’: the first defining relations of domination, the second referring to agency to act. Which makes me think of Foucault (1980), for whom power is not something only present in privileged circles, but throughout the whole social body, and can be enacted by anyone. When reading the call for this year’s conference, I see traces of ‘power

over' in calling-out the current state of affairs (economic inequality, technological determinism, weakening democracy, etc.); but also of 'power to', when referring to the need of design to confront such issues (as in the 'refugee challenge', it seems searching for 'solutions'). However, I doubt that a transformation can be achieved without questioning the conditions that produced the current state of affairs. I believe debates around design and power ought to take place on different levels: from social structures to daily life practices, and by designers as much as non-designers, and I think the South has plenty to say about this. Do you think it's relevant to trigger a South-North dialogue around design and power in the context of NORDES 2017? Which do you think are interesting references? I believe there's a great potential to mutually learn from the practices emerging in different parts of our souths and norths.

Pablo.

Bogotá, March 14<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Pablo,

I'll share my thoughts in the same conversational tone you propose. Your invitation to have Scandinavian researchers question the conditions that allowed them to generate participatory practices reminded me an idea of Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007 pp. 83-84), about the way in which disciplines (or those who design them) build their own origins. For him, disciplines generate their own mythologies, which allows them to structure a canon to define how and who is allowed to speak, the valid themes, that which the students ought to know, teachers to teach and professionals to practice; canons, adds Castro-Gómez, as power apparatuses that organize fluxes of knowledge, making them identifiable and manipulable. I embrace your call for a critical reflection around design and power in this year's NORDES, noting perhaps a lack of self-criticality. However, it might be unnoticed by many in terms of Bourdieu's *habitus*, meaning a "shared structuring structure" that leads to naturalize "a world that is sensed and seen in relation to certain position and disposition" (Bourdieu, 1980, pp. 86).

Amongst the references for debate, I suggest a NORDES 2015 *keynote* lecture delivered by another southern thinker: Cameron Tonkinwise (2015). On that occasion the theme was "Design Ecologies", and Tonkinwise questioned the brief in a similar fashion as our dialogue does, yet noted that was met with certain criticism for just denouncing the faults and not suggesting alternatives. NORDES 2015 advocated for diversity, but which diversity, Tonkinwise questioned. Diversity tolerated by the ecology of a certain place? Or migratory diversity, with the capacity to challenge – and even change – an ecology? Now, let's replace "design ecologies" for "design + power" and Tonkinwise for

Calderón/Gutiérrez. After checking the call for NORDES 2017 (surely limited by my *habitus* and directed by your questions) I find the words 'design' and 'power' always in singular, ignoring polysemy. I prefer to speak in terms of designs and powers, or norths and souths and many other places, something that is ignored in the call.

Let's speak about souths not as places in the world, but as spaces where people can imagine other ways of 'being in the world'. A sort of "little public sphere" which, following Nikos Papastergiadis ([2009]/2011), is not confined to southern hemisphere, but is related to all the contexts sharing "similar patterns of colonisation, migration and cultural combinations". The south – or souths – gather cultural imaginaries attempting to transcend imposed classification (through 'power over'), to visibilise its own history (hidden by colonization) and its own denied traditions. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010:8) argues that the understanding of the world is much broader than the western understanding of the world, just as 'design' and 'power' exceed its north-western understanding. Such is my hypothesis: there is design (or its equivalent) in every social group. That's why I don't speak about designers and non-designers, but about professional designers and designers of all other kinds (daily-life, vernacular, spontaneous, etc.). Antonio García-Gutiérrez confronts such system of compartments and classifications with a strategy called "declassification". For him, generalization and negative exclusion (as in design/non-design) produce that, in most dichotomies, the subordinated element is presented as a negation of the element that organizes the couple ('power over'), through prefixes as un-faithful, non-believer, ab-normal or non-designer; yet the negated instance usually represents a much larger and more diverse world than that of the negating instance (García, 2014:396). It would suffice to think of the amount of artefacts made by designers in comparison to those made by 'non-designers'. This reinforces the notion of "majority world", proposed by Bangladeshi photographer and activist Shahidul Alam (2008) as a replacement for concepts as 'third world countries' and 'developing world', noting that that which is considered secondary is usually much larger than that considered as reference. From an intercultural perspective, we could postulate the *designs of the souths* as ways of prefiguring artefacts that are left out of the margins of what is considered 'design'. Let me remind you that in Chinese, Arabic, Hindi and many indigenous languages of the world, there's not an etymological trace of the word 'design' (with its European roots); however, there are terms referring to 'forms of prefiguring artefacts' that could be considered equivalent to practices of what in the west is considered design; I call those practices *designs with other names*.

To finalize the present letter, and in the spirit of avoiding the lack of self-critique that you encounter in NORDES 2017, it would suffice to value the sum of the weaknesses of the ‘so-called’ non-design and the skills of the ‘so-called’ non-designers as an inexhaustible source of *designs with other names* and *designs of the souths*.

Alfredo.

Brussels, March 17<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Alfredo,

In your message I encounter valuable elements to continue deconstructing – from our south – some of the issues suggested for this year’s NORDES. And I don’t mean ‘deconstruction’ as a negation of ‘construction’, but both as interdependent conditions. But in your response I also spot the gaps in my argumentation, as I critique the global north from the southern subaltern position, yet I assume the position of the oppressor by using the dichotomy design/non-design. I feel like the oppressed of Paulo Freire (1973) who, after gaining a position of relative power (perhaps represented in my six years in Europe?), becomes an instrument of oppression (or an oppressor himself). Nevertheless, this reflection helps me understand how my *habitus* has adapted to certain conditions and circumstances.

I am intrigued by your reference to Castro Gómez, where I find important elements to contribute in a critical and constructive manner to the debate on NORDES 2017 and support the path of our epistolary conversation, which aims to deconstruct certain discourses on (the power of) design to allow for their reconstruction (or resurgence). I feel the heart of the issue is in the dominant discourses of design, the canons, which might be considered a conceptual north. South of such discourses we find a series of practices that, if well in many cases might not be considered as design (by those who define the disciplines), carry the seeds of a diversity of renovated practices, or what you call *designs with other names*.

In *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich (1973) advocates for autonomous and vernacular learning practices through networks, over scholarly systems of educational institutions. Illich suggests that, if well the book focuses on educational systems, the same principles might as well apply to different sectors of society (politics, justice, communication). Which makes me wonder: wouldn’t it be relevant, as well, to deschool design? And with this I don’t mean to free design from formal education (though it might pass through there). Instead, deconstructing the power relations present in the dominant discourses of design (schooled design) that still assume human beings as tokens in a production-consumption dynamic. And this stands close from what Papanek (1971) denounced, by criticising the role of designers for making products that advertisers could sell by fabricating false ‘needs’. This deschooling of design, towards *designs with other names*, would pass by what

you reference from García-Gutiérrez as *declassification*, as the breaking down of boundaries of dominant discourses in design, which have been built from classifications and qualifications that sanction what is accepted and what is not. But let’s attempt to propose and trigger a constructive debate – beyond the sole-criticism of which Tonkinwise was accused – by indicating some alternative paths.

A lesson that would be valid in the global North, as much as in the global South, is to allow for our practices to be permeated by other ways of being in the world, other ontologies and epistemologies different to the ones that we know and inhabit. In this way, *designs with other names* is not understood as an opposing category to *design*, but as a call to question and expand the ways in which it operates. Scandinavia has been a pioneer in participatory and collaborative design practices in the global north, which represents an openness to question their position as designers and include *others* as participants in *their* designs. As well as considering others as part of our design, we should perhaps generate the conditions for the emergence of those *designs with other names*. Can you think of such emergencies already happening somewhere that might serve as a valuable reference? I can already think of Ernesto Oroza’s (2009) take on what he terms *technological disobedience* in scarcity-driven Cuba as a sample of what happens when we let those other voices emerge.

Looking forward to read back from you.

Pablo.

Bogotá, March 21<sup>st</sup> 2017

Dear Pablo,

What you call “gaps” in your argument is a southern thought with northern manners; beyond geographic references, it represents an unnoticed supposition that the ‘expert’ knows more than the non-expert, denying as well the right of the non-expert to be an expert of its own experience. Looking at the *designs of the souths* we ought not to fear contradictions. García-Gutiérrez suggests we embrace them, and not only as negations, but as different modes of understanding and acting upon the world. Assumed and accepted dissent is the first step to understand diverse forms of being in the world. Which made me think of a scene of the film *Ratatouille* (2007), when Émile, the vulgar brother of the main character, Remy, discovers the hidden culture of his brother:

Émile: "Wait, you read?"

Rémy: "Well, not excessively"

Émile: "Oh man. Does Dad know?"

Rémy: "You could fill a book, lots of books, with things Dad don't know!"

Emile, on a mouse level, represents the stereotyped and conventional world of the expert; but Rémy, *Oh lálá!* he's in the permanent search of reconfigurations of the already designed. He's not a follower, but a de-centralizer of use in a journey southbound, bringing once in a while novelties to reality.

Following your thoughts, we need to *deschool* design; but we would also need to declassify it. I believe on recuperating the polytechnic man that lives within all the excluded peoples of exclusive societies. In poly-cardinal countries – as I like to call them to refer to various directions and take away from 'the west' its dominant prominence – have emerged those who will never be modern (those 'not-yet-designed' by the canon) or perhaps those who design in different modes. Kirtee Sha (2012) sees in the slums of the planet scenarios that, beyond problems, account for the human ability to create in difficult situations; we ought to overcome the pretension of saviours and learn and accompany endogenous processes of such communities (which are the majority of urban dwellers in the world) who, in their own way, already practice those *designs with other names*.

In a similar line, Vyjayanthi Rao (2010) invites us to stop thinking about design as a universal solvent for modern problems; according to her, we have to look at the speculative, innovative and productive potentialities of emerging collectivities, instead of assuming – from the roles of professional experts – what such collectivities are and impose on them what they should dream of becoming. The binary designers / non-designers leaves professional designers in a bad position, seen through the 'majority world' of Alam and the ideas of García-Gutiérrez, as their design is minor compared to the quantity of artefacts designed in the world. I assume that with time we will see less professionals following 'the canon', living under the illusion that they are 'the designers' in the extent that the rest of humans are non-designers (and therefore designable). And here stands the paradox: *designs with other names* have always been present in many subaltern cultures; we have simply been educated to not see them.

Even within academia there are attempts of giving a voice to these *designs with other names*, as the Maori Johnson Witihira (2013) who, in his doctoral work, linked graphic design with Maori thought. I see this as an approach to design of the south from a Maori tradition. There are designs with other names everywhere, evident in the emergence of indigenous studies and literature of alternative modes of action in the world; in the 'autonomous designs' of Escobar (2017) and his work with afro-Colombian communities; in the extrapolation of constructive logics behind the Q'iswa Chaka (2016) Inca bridge in Peru; in the South African weavers of phone cable or the artefacts resulting from the Indian Jugaad, equivalent to western 'innovation' (Subhas, 2014).

Designs with other names have always been there; perhaps, besides de-schooling, we should also consider de-scaling to perceive and allow others (remember that as white male professionals we are north in the south of Colombian peasants, afro-Colombian and indigenous) to teach us, as Rémy to Émile, that there are many 'designs' that we ignore, as they are named and practiced in 'other ways', yet they precede by far everything that professions, with their presumptuousness, pretend to appropriate.

Alfredo.

Brussels, March 28<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Alfredo,

When I first wrote to you, I was not sure where the conversation would lead us. However, I considered important to add a critical note to this NORDES conference from a southern perspective and knew you were the ideal interlocutor in this endeavour. This exchange is just the beginning for a larger conversation that will continue in this and other fora, about power (which power?) and design (which design?), and how *designs with other names* can help us deconstruct dominant discourses.

Pablo.

Bogota, April 4<sup>th</sup> 2017

Dear Pablo,

Your last message made me think of Krippendorff (1995), who states that power can be undone if we oppose the temptation to build universalizing theories (especially in design), whose inherent imperialism discourages local understanding and diversity. 'We', as it seems, is a word that we must use carefully, because, depending on the context in which it appears, it always includes and excludes. Thus, the transformation of the world depends on we/us, true, but a different 'we/us' on every occasion. Let us keep on designing 'together'.

Alfredo.

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