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Inter-University Design Workshop: plurality in design education

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Abstract | This paper presents the process to build and maintain a collective project between five design schools in Mexico City. In 2018, the Inter-University Design Workshop started as an “innovative education project that understands design as a mean for linking students and design faculty to the construction of open, diverse, and collective platforms for the materialization and testing of intentions and solutions to the complex problems of contemporary urban Mexican society”. In the context of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the project continued in a digital format, keeping the initial intention of bringing students close to one other, by action and will, for the guild’s sake and for their capacity to collaborate. From the strategies and outcomes that TiUD (Taller inter Universitario de Diseño) member students reached, we take valuable conclusions as clues for the new normal in education for our Workshop to secure its continuity the following years.

**KEYWORDS | EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION, HIGHER EDUCATION, DESIGN ACTIVISM,
DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION, DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

1 Introduction

“The City belongs to its citizens. Is conceived as a physical space, that brings civilization, citizenship, secularity and habitable for the full exercise of its possibilities, the equitable enjoyment of its goods and the pursuit of happiness.”

Art. 12th Mexico City’s Constitution (2016, p.31).

Mexico City is the archetype of a complex unequal macro-city. Local government and inhabitants struggle and live through a time of multiple challenges and constant interrelated transformations, intensified in terms of scale, complexity and lack of resources as time passes. In this context, there's not much alternative than look for a space of civil freedom and power to create and transform the spaces we inhabit as the most important exercise of our urban life. Understanding freedom and ability as a possibility to thrive, in search of what we have in common as Mexican designers, is the Interuniversity Design Workshop's pursued goal.

Having to cope with the great defiance and urgency to build a "More Liveable Mexico City for All", design as a discipline and designers as citizens are confronted with the question of "How to contribute to the creation of an environmentally sustainable urban context and a fairer society in which living is worth living?". An additional challenge for this task is unifying perspectives, keeping the fundamental differences while enriching our collective interpretations of the surrounding reality. Bringing together design students from various socio-economical-cultural contexts represents the City's richness and complexity; using these representations as a powerful tool to communicate and understand has been one relevant outcome and incentive to continue this work.

From this stance, design practice and its guild present valuable resource to find transformative answers, transcending the sphere of aesthetics with a potential to explore. In Buchanan words, "the role of design in sustaining, developing, and integrating human beings into broader ecological and cultural environments, shaping these environments when desirable and possible or adapting to them when necessary" (1992, p.10).

The third opened an opportunity to behold those questionings answering with a new one: How can we harness the design student's collective talent to design a better city for all? Our response as a collective-academic group was presenting students the occasion of open dialogue, understanding each other through empathy -or sympathy- and acknowledging that this is the City of ours, in a time we have to live in it. Shared responsibility and desire kept us together through the last three years: a wish for a better future for our time being and generations to come. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown offered an overlapped dare that we accepted, not without caution. We are sure about the need to find new ways to survive and collaborate, being truthful to our commitment.

2. TiUD Origins

2.1 Mexico City as World Design Capital

Mexican designer's guild is an energetic and vibrant yet unlinked community. Often, we ran into each other in events related to design; we are glad to meet, but those encounters do not usually lead to networking or beneficial collaborations. Although, we can be good friends or acquaintances. In 2016, World Design Organization designated Mexico City 2018 World Design Capital (WDC) as:

“The sixth World Design Capital™ and the very first city from the Americas to receive this title, Mexico City has a powerful story to share on the world stage, as a model for other megacities around the world using design to tackle the challenges of urbanisation and ensure a more liveable city.” (WDC, 2017).

Laboratorio para la Ciudad (City Lab) was the government entity coordinating the guild and programs. The planning started with worktables by topics, including the “Design-Education Worktable”, formed in its origins, at least eight different design schools from universities located in Mexico City. As the first outcome, the University Passport was rapidly developed in a popular program to bring students to the WDC events. Design students would collect points for attending each event, and the “best attender” -the student who got more points- won as a prize a scholarship for a course at the European Design Institute.

The following significant proposal was to build an inter-university class for design students. During the first weeks, that idea was more like a recurrent joke; but soon enough, the idea turned into a dream and later became a provocation for the worktable members. Every participant was a faculty member at a design school; consequently, the challenge to bring together our students and expertise seemed possible yet difficult. The initial consideration was conceiving the workshop as a participatory design activity, framed on the Smith, Bossen, and Kanstrup intention (Thirteenth Participatory Design Conference), describing the participatory design as a tool “to engage not only with the public sphere but also with everyday life, and as researchers engage stakeholders in experimental practices of innovation through a long-term engagement in technology design, social innovation and future-making” (2017, p.66)

The planning for the TiUD's first edition, supported mainly by the City Lab, allow the conditions to discuss struggles that might appear when merging students from different universities in one single project. The design team summoned experts in education and collaborative projects from several countries and disciplines (philosophers, activists, lawyers, and designers). After a few months, we reached a common objective: gathering design students as design activists, promoters of collaboration, to activate Mexican society. The study objects were the City's social issues; participants would collaborate to bring their

attention to each university tradition's strengths and opportunity areas, understanding that we all need each other to get stronger and better.

Thus, the learning objectives for the students were:

- a) Understanding design concepts and constructs to leverage social change.
- b) Applying methods and tools to face complex problems, using a systemic approach and through design research.
- c) Developing collaboration and communication skills to involve the diversity of stakeholders and multidisciplinary work for the collective conceptualisation and visualisation of diverse alternatives to bring the solution of social problems.
- d) Analysing the impact of "what is designed" on social reality.

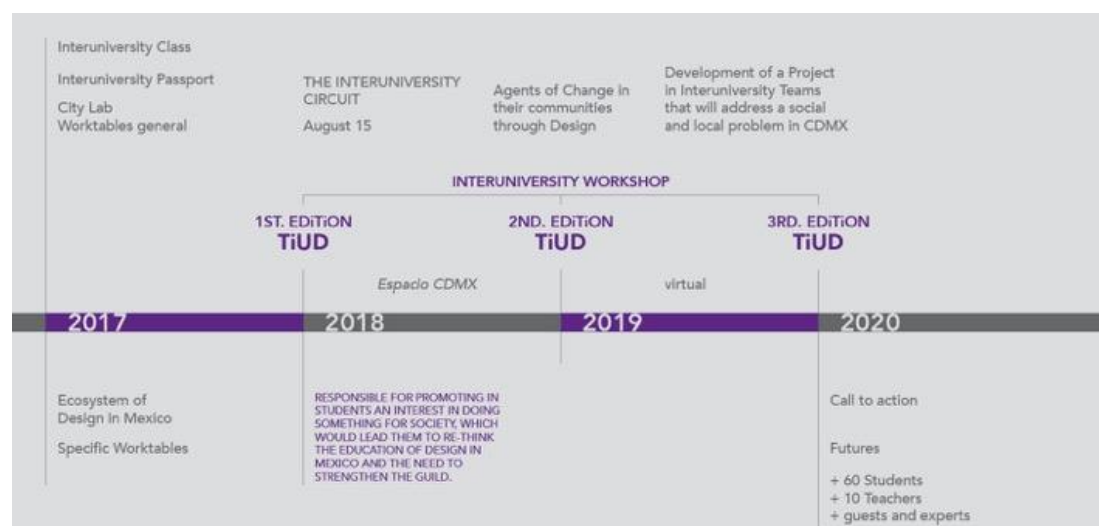


Figure 1. Road map of TiUD 2017- 2020.

2.2 Framework

This century demands specific skills to train professionals to perform effectively and broadly in both social and professional environments, as in their leisure time (Dede, 2010; Yelland, Kalantis, & Cope, 2008). Socioeconomic development requires competent and responsive individuals, and at the same time, active and imaginative members of a society, promoting change in the search for equality. Also, the forms of employment available for designers, today and shortly, are diversified in terms of roles, broadness and focus (Kaygan, Ilhan, & Oygür, 2020, p.15). Consequently, this consideration brings several implications for design education institutions, especially in countries like Mexico, with fewer companies that might hire an in-house designer.

From an academic perspective, design education challenges prescribe the importance of understanding adaptations and improvements in adapting the curricula to the present and

future reality of the employment market for designers. Hence the value in finding an opportunity for an open, refreshing and honest dialogue among the Design-Education worktable members. Every university focus and tradition bring the possibility of bringing together every and unique capacity of our students to solve the complex problem of our city.

Every edition of TiUD takes place in the fall (August to December); consequently, some universities have to adjust their calendars to match others. Then, one can imagine it represents a great effort of coordination for the Faculties. Every student enrolled in the course receive credits for it as an elective topic in their curricula. Moreover, students have to answer the selection process by presenting a video and a letter to expose their intention to participate. Being part of the TiUD as a student comes with significant responsibility and requires the best disposition, for the students are the face of their University. The approach methodology is through Participatory Action Research (PAR). Participants are researchers on the task, following a systematic process and analysis with a vast potential of strengthening horizontal relationships among professionals, colleges, and communities (Anderson, 2017).



Figure 2. Mapping in TiUD 2018.



Figure 4. *Interuniversity Design Workshop at Chapultepec Park "Old train station".*

The topic for the first edition was social activation; the instructions for students were to design an intervention in a selected local community to which they belong, engaging citizens to find solutions to the issues they faced in daily basis. In the first part, field research was relevant to gather enough information about the problem and the community in a neighbourhood or locality of the City. Eliminating preconceptions, misconceptions and prejudice, is the most challenging part for the group. As a result, we all succeed in identifying ourselves, first as humans, then as Mexican citizens and then as designers. Finding a common language, increasing communication skills and elaborating persuasive arguments were the students' gains up to this point.

For the project's sake and students' sense of achievement, it is always relevant to discuss the challenges that collaboration brings. On the one hand, communication should be fluent, constant and precise to promote equality and acknowledge diversity. On the other hand, as Fernández-Díaz, Gutiérrez, and Fernández (2019, p.80) explain, the promotion of links between contexts and reflections on participatory dilemmas, should be a priority. It means to set the question, "Is what is important for me, important for you in the same way?"

Through mapping the problems around the City, we were able to observe the dimension of the project. We all covered most of the metropolitan area, so we had the opportunity to bring a broad perspective into the analysis; finding the common elements might be the most relevant insights in searching for solutions. One significant case to show was the "Public Space Recovery" project at Iztapalapa. This municipality, located in the City's east area, is one of the most populated in Mexico City: it has more than 1.8 million inhabitants with a population density of 15 635,80 individuals per km² (Alcaldía Iztapalapa, 2019). A first edition participant is an area resident, so she invited her teammates to observe an urgent problem in her community. There was a park with infrastructure as a place for children to play, community members to gather together, close by an elementary school. Sadly, this place was used by drug dealers and for every possible illegal activity. The team members

interviewed some neighbours and discovered a recurrent answer: 'There are good people here ("Aquí hay gente Buena").

Iztapalapa's team came up with the idea of inviting the community to a public space intervention where they will paint the walls, plant some trees and play games with children and their families in the park. They choose to use the phrase taken from the interviews and use it as a model for other messages painted in the park: a reminder for the community of the people they live with – just good people. Community members responded gladly and participated the first weekend, asking for a second intervention the following week. So, the team did come back once more, and neighbours kept repeating the activity until the park felt it belongs to them again.



Figure 5. *Aquí hay gente Buena. Public space recovery at Iztapalapa.*

TiUD's second edition held 45 students and ten teachers from five universities; it followed five tracks: education, water, violence, food and migration. During an intensive boot camp to kick off the second edition, experts in these topics presented the context of the Mexican reality in these tracks. Students formed their work teams according to their interests and their curiosity in exploring these topics.

It is worth mentioning that talking and proposing discussions about their identity for this generation of students, as students from one University with its correspondent vision, was not challenging as it was talking about their ideology. The idea of representing their University's core capacities was obvious, so they showed no issues working with other school students. However, they found themselves very cautious about sharing political or religious ideas and stances. Providing a neutral space to talk, express themselves, find differences and common ground was the first challenge for this course.

One good example of this edition's outcome was "El Tortamundos"² a project about migration. The designed activity was to invite people from different nationalities to spend a couple of hours of their weekends in Parque México, in a central zone of the City. The invitation included the request of bringing any food or dish that belong to people's nation or cultural identity. Every plate should be shared by putting it inside a *bolillo* (a type of bread)

² "Tortamundos" is the combination of the word *torta*, a sandwich made with *bolillo*, a popular type of bread used in Mexico City, and the word *trotamundos*, which means globetrotter.

to divide the food and pass it among the guests. Once every person had a *bolillo* with a dish inside, visitors held in their hands a *Torta de Mundo* (a World Sandwich). Then, they get to talk about how they felt in Mexico as a migrant.

Valuable conversations occurred in that table; the community of locals -from different nationalities- shared a moment they had not shared before in the whole time they were living in Mexico. Some of the participants continued gathering during the weekends, bonding and assembling a supportive community among them.



Figure 6. *El Tortamundos* invitation and first test. Migration and lunch at Parque México.

3. TiUD 2020: A New Normal Education case

3.1 Planning

The emergence of COVID-19, for the first time in history, caused the whole of humanity to face the same set of challenges simultaneously (Dussel, 2020). The most evident state of emergency turned us inwards towards our communities. However, with the beginning of the pandemic and the lockdown, uncertainty became present in such a way that we felt compelled to reflect and extend the dialogue towards this issue so that we could be clear about the concepts through which we would build the third edition of our workshop.

To do this, we organized an online forum in which we invited international experts to share their views on how to identify, within what we denominated the “common emergency”, what was worth sustaining after the pandemic. Based on the initial forum’s information, we understood ‘The Common Emergency’ (*La Emergencia de lo Común*³), as the emergence of

³ The word *emergencia* (emergency) has two possible interpretations, one referring to “urgency” and the second refers to “emergence”. We used both meanings to explain what has been emerged as a shared value for our commonality.

shared values that we must sustain over time. We also know that some other elements we have in common that we should get apart from, to reach solid, integrated and responsible communities, in favour of fairness and equity. That which was common among us, arose at first in this group, as a disobedient will of the state of things and became what sustains us due to its repeated and renewed discovery in students' different rotation.

Thus, the 2020 edition observed civil society, searching for emerging creativity that arose from a crisis context due to lockdown. The design project focused on identifying "naive solutions", resulting from necessity and born from civil society. Consequently, opportunities arose where design can contribute to the development, dissemination and systematization of these initiatives. We have called these actions "Emerging Strategies", understanding that they arise out of necessity and will that they are, or could be, a source of inspiration for the design industry.

3.2 Development

Unlike the past two, the 2020 edition, was held entirely online: not an easy decision. At the beginning we thought there would be at least a few sessions to face each other in the same space. In the end, we had to let that idea pass, or better, adapt it to the conditions that we considered most pertinent. One relevant concern we had was to bring the students to close since the beginning, so they felt a sense of belonging for they would be willing to bond as a community. To make that possible, we invite all the registered participants to an online breakfast, so we had time to know each other through the story behind the dishes. Some explained that they had their favourite mug that remembered of their grannie's coffee or those were the best tamales in the neighbourhood. By the end of it, we gain a bit of familiarity through those stories, to begin with, the collective work.

Instead of sharing a table, we shared ZOOM™ as a digital classroom and MIRO™ as a digital board during this edition. These digital platforms were our tools to interact throughout the semester. While the conversation took place in audio and video with the first, the latter allowed us to create virtual idea boards to capture and share perspectives through texts, photos and videos.

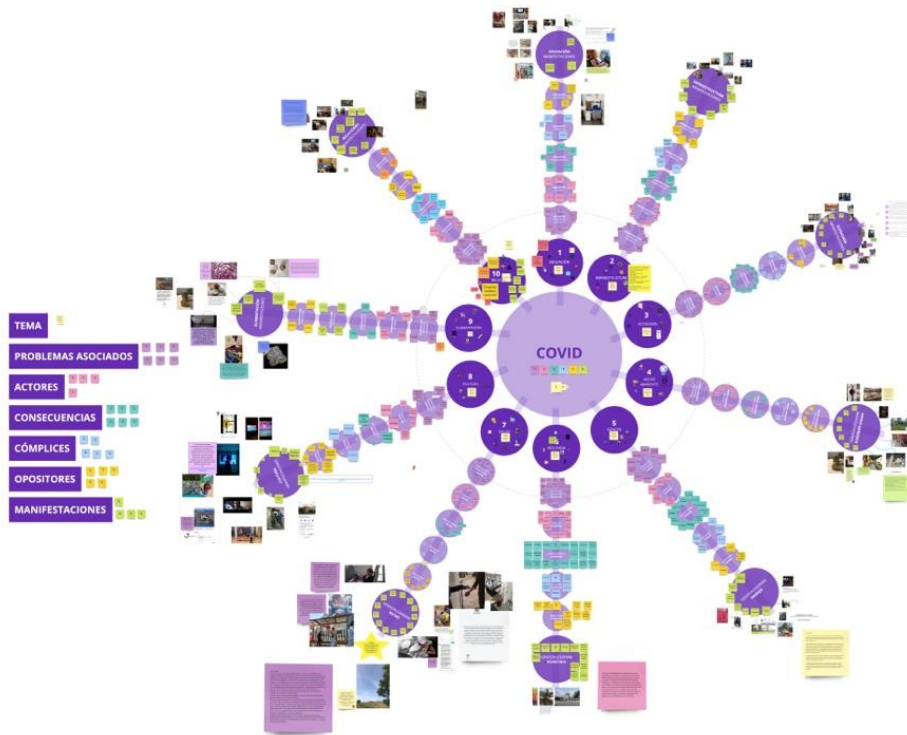


Figure 7. Miro Board. Emergent strategies analysis from Mexican civil society.

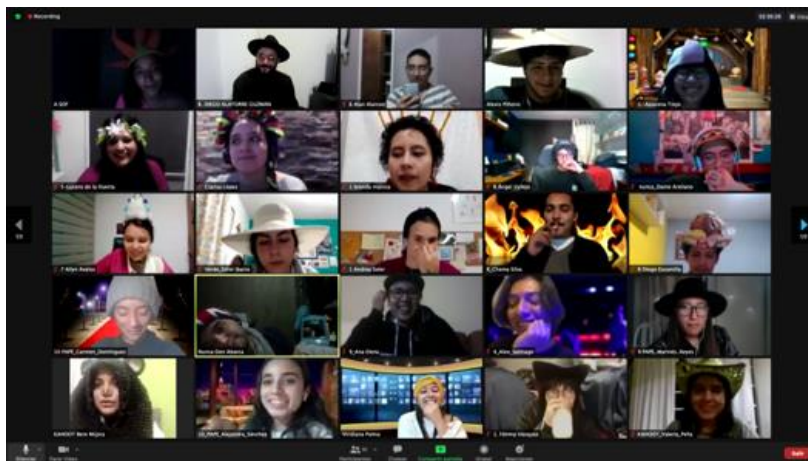


Figure 8. Zoom Party. Integration and bonding in 2020 TiUD edition.

The proposed methodology for this edition came from transition design approach (Irwin, Tonkinwise, & Kossoff, 2015; Kivimaa, Boon, Hyysalo, & Klerkx, 2019), with a vision that seeks the integration and diversity of multilevel perspectives (Geels, 2010, 2019; Moradi & Vagnoni, 2018). For this edition, we reinforce the theoretical framework by taking up

concepts such as the common (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019), sustainability (Garduño García, 2017) and activism (Narberhaus & Sheppard, 2015). We integrate causes-consequences of events analysis as a foundation from which they will make sense of their context and propose new narratives.

The project began in early September and lasted until mid-December, with interuniversity sessions on Wednesday afternoons brought together 65 students and ten participating professors from five design schools. In this edition, we added one extra day a week for professors from each university to meet with their respective students.

Two basic operations fixed the interaction throughout the process: exploring the systemic complexity from reality and fostering a dialogic interaction between participants. To simplify the collected information, drawings and visualization through diagrams allowed a glimpse of the complexity experienced. In such a way, when representing the knowledge acquired, they would make their position explicit concerning the event and, therefore, could communicate their discoveries, giving way to the next stage. The methodological process followed stages and steps in presenting the topics, developing a guided practice and applying the learning outcomes to students' project.

The following sessions schedule allowed us to set the pace and match rhythms between teachers and students. Topics were arranged through the course as follows: a) Problem mapping; b) Historical evolution mapping; c) Future views; d) Improvement stages; e) Designing ecologies; f) Call to action; and h) Presentation and final reflection.



Figure 9. Sessions at 2020 Edition

3.3 Third edition results

The best ideas emerge from moments of crisis. In this emergency - and in others - the inhabitants of Mexico City demonstrated an enormous capacity for solidarity and great creativity towards offering solutions to the challenges that arose. Based on past experiences, this edition surged from the importance of activating our communities as a strategy to extend collective action.

In a virtual forum on December 5th, ten final projects were presented, divided into three conceptual blocks: education, equity and health. The students chose blocks according to

their concerns and the identified priorities. That distribution allowed us to interpret that the outcome brought to the participants to reflect on their situations.

Each outcome has the conditions to be implemented in the present conditions through social media or digital platform development. Students followed their initiative and focus on the result and impact these projects would have on people. It is still a question for us if the participants' commitment will remain after this edition ends.

The project "*México en Miradas*" (Mexico in gazes) presents the eyes' expressions as an authentic sight of emotions, as a side effect of the use of face masks. It invites people to share a selfie while wearing a facemask, describing feelings and emotions that they have experienced throughout this pandemic.

The project uses social media so visitors can find testimonies from other people to promote empathy. By sharing, they create content that fosters a sense of community and support among individuals to pursue the common good.



Figure 10. Mexico in Gazes. 2020's edition on-line project.

3. Conclusions

The Inter-University Design Workshop promotes a diversity of visions about the commonality: the guild of designers, the academic community and CDMX citizens. We have whiteness its manifestation in the shape of interests, purpose, values and, at the same time, dreams, wishes, emotions and commitment. From those manifestations, we hold a shared identity and the will to find solutions for our city and us citizens. As a group, we keep searching convergence, shared spaces and common ground, which sometimes are blurred, but when we reveal them, we get to define what kind of designers are we.

Each iteration brings learnings at different scales: from the progressive definition of the curricula to the diversification of roles. In the third edition, projects' complementarity is evident when observing the students' interconnection process beyond their teams through the coincidence of roles and concerns. During this process, professors guided the students, allowing them to choose their path. Results' quality was surprisingly clear, reached by commitment and compromise inside the teams. An important finding in this digital context was that students could perfectly navigate an ocean of ideas without losing their purpose.

For complexity visualization during the research stage, diagrams and digital boards were fundamental to synthesize, allowing the interconnection between multiple elements and ideas.

However, we did encounter several limitations, mostly related to the extension of the students work beyond the class, e.g., most projects were not linked to third parties nor external communities. These considerations open up new research areas for those interested: we suspect that the disappearance of our physicality withing online activities allowed for more intimate interactions to take place. In this *New Normal*, we founded what we were looking for since the first edition: a way to keep track in real time of the group's activities. By centralizing and recording the online interactions we can transcend time and space, making the context available for people all around the globe and at any time.

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