

# Women, Design and Democracy. What Future for the Mediterranean?

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Design, as a cultural act that can detect social changes and translate them into a project, is an optimum instrument for driving forward artistic and cultural trends aimed at the democratisation of society. And it is, above all, female designers who, with their sensibility for the social aspects of development, rise up as notable vanguard figures. Hence the importance of promoting “Mediterranean design” through encouraging lines of microcredit and rapid manufacturing technologies.

## Mediterranean Design as a Strategy

The Mediterranean is still experiencing a delicate moment in its long history after the promising season of the Arab Spring.

The rebirth of North Africa, protagonist in the western media in 2010/11, had augured unpredictable scenarios of democracy for Arab countries and a more balanced relation between the two shores of the Mediterranean. The events of those days, with the “town square” demonstrations, had shown the emergence of bottom-up phenomena, proof of the great need of Arab youths and women to assert themselves, to participate in the socio-political evolution of their countries and to be the protagonists of a widening of cultural horizons in Arab society.

Today, we are experiencing a moment of regression. The change achieved has not taken

place based on ideals of democratic reform that had inspired the Arab Spring. The scenario seems confusing and complicated owing to the tragic events in Syria and the economic crisis that has shaken the Euro-Mediterranean area.

Despite current disillusionments, speaking of “Mediterranean design” is strategic, because design is the act of creative and project culture that can anticipate scenarios of possible futures that are, above all, the expression of social changes.

Design is a factor of change, which can make the technical opportunities visible and interpret them from a social point of view. If it is adequately linked with productive activities, the project becomes an instrument of the future as an emerging process: with production, design becomes a “thing” and “a useful and meaningful form”, an artefact that enters the

merchandise system and thereafter the system of everyday objects accompanying society towards small or big changes in lifestyles, values and visions of the world. It can contribute to the assimilation of groundbreaking innovations with the objective of improving quality of life or manifesting disapproval of certain emerging positions. As K. Fallan (2010: 55) argues, design and society “are formed and transformed simultaneously and in correlation.” In short, design is a process that is not limited to giving form to things but intervenes in the transformations of society, conferring form and meanings on technological innovations so that they can be understood and used. Often those who work in this sector are vanguard figures, but their creativity is not removed from what happens in the field of technology or everyday life, what is seen in the street and what occurs in the fields of thought or science, the social structures or artistic and young imagination.

For some time, not only have the countries of the northern Mediterranean coast been interested in design as an agent of innovation and development, but so have the southern countries: this is especially shown by the number of design schools in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon or Egypt, not to mention Israel, which boasts internationally renowned schools, such as the Bezalel Academy of Art & Design in Jerusalem. Each of these schools trains hundreds of creative and innovative youths every year. From Jordan, Ahmad Humeid, founder of Redesign Arabia, provokes these youths with the online platform manifesto “*Design will save the (Arab) world*”.

## Women’s Design for Cultural and Economic Development

Even more strategic, in this specific moment, is talking about women’s design and documenting professional and research activities by women in the artistic project and design field, with the consequent production and business implications.

This has been, since the 1970s, the main concern of much of the research on the theory and history of design, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries and in the field of Design Cultural Studies which have had the merit of breaking from consolidated certainties through historiographical methods, exposing the ideologies and stereotypes that were behind the poor regard for women’s activities. “[The] occupation of an ideologically strategic terrain” (Pollock, 1982)<sup>1</sup> like that of valuing women’s creative and design activities is still urgent today, especially in a context like that of Mediterranean countries in which a discriminatory attitude predominates in relation to women due to specific factors of national cultures (sometimes even legislative) that in several ways obstruct women’s freedom to act, limiting confidence in their own talent and the achievement of positions in the labour world.

To understand women’s role in the national economies, it is useful to consider some economic studies. These include OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) studies that have shown that in many developing countries small and medium sized enterprises managed by women grow at a faster rate than others and create employment. World Bank studies have also shown

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1. Pollock, G., “Vision, Voice and Power: Feminist Art History and Marxism”, Block 6, 1982, taken from C. Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design”, *Design Issues*, Vol. 3, No. 2, autumn 1986, The MIT Press, p. 4. “As Griselda Pollock has stated, a feminist approach is neither a side-issue nor a novel historical perspective - it is a central concern of contemporary design history. As she has pointed out, ‘we are involved in a contest for occupation of an ideologically strategic terrain.’”

that funding granted to women guarantees the efficacy of the investments, ensuring that the funds allocated will be used to develop new activities, especially for children's education and to construct a better future in areas of interest. Lastly, the economic studies of FEMISE<sup>2</sup> (*Femise Report on the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership*, 2006) tell us that, from the 1980s onwards, the development of southern Mediterranean countries has been based on opening to foreign markets, which in planned economies has involved high rates of female participation both at formal economic levels (institutions) and informal levels. More generally, it is interesting to cite the studies undertaken by the British academics Wittenberg-Cox and Alison Maitland, authors of *Why Women Mean Business: Understanding the Emergence of Our Next Economic Revolution*, where they explain why the presence of women in companies represents a competitive advantage in relation to the cultural complexity.

The awareness that there is a connection between women's participation in social and productive life, the capacity to imagine and construct possible futures, economic development, social innovation and democracy is a theme of governance which the design system should reflect on and debate, especially in a context like that of Mediterranean countries.

## Innovation Driven by Women

Although political events and dominant ideologies create obstacles to socio-cultural evolution, the world is continually renewed, sometimes with fresh elements far removed from stereotypes.

Therefore, in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, among others, women show that they are a vanguard in movement, who can conquer the international stage developing highly diverse activities: they are designers, artisans, artists, photographers, filmmakers and more generally women who have been capable of integrating their creative capacity into the professional activity, which has made them agents of transformation and points of reference for future generations.

Today, it is possible to document the evolutions of "Mediterranean design" by recognising women's creativity in southern Mediterranean countries, where we are seeing the growth of talents.

In Morocco Soumiya Jalal chairs the Moroccan Association of Designers, based in Casablanca. This designer is known for her work in the sector of fabrics developed on the border between art and design. In fact, although she uses artisanal techniques, she carries out technical-linguistic research into the use of combining unusual materials for the textile sector, which can renew industrial production. Based on this research, she produces small handmade runs of fabrics for furniture or sells experimental samples to textile industries, especially in France, which use them as stimulus for experimentation with new industrial fabrics. In her everyday commitment, the designer expands her creative activity with the training-educational support for artisanal production in the NGO sector. Her objective is the evolution of traditional knowledge in a contemporary techno-artistic culture that can help to improve women's status in Morocco and their quality of life. For her professional activity dedicated to female weavers in Morocco,

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2. FEMISE is a network of economic institutes which since 1999 has been carrying out research on economic, commercial and social issues related with the creation of a free trade area in the Mediterranean and the establishment of bilateral association agreements as well as south-south trade exchanges. In 2001, FEMISE activities were renewed for a further 4 years.

Soumaya Jalal has received the King Mohamed VI award, whose fundamental political objective is “modernity, which guarantees equality of rights for men and women.”

The Egyptian fashion designer Laila Neamatalla works with the Siwa Women’s Nature Artisanship Development Project that, within the Siwa Sustainable Development Initiative, involves more than three hundred women in the Siwa Oasis, guiding their exceptional skills as needlewomen (which the women in the Oasis learn as girls from their mothers and grandmothers) to create products marketed under the label “Siwa Creations”. The project endeavours to value and renew an artisanal activity of quality and also has the merit of putting women from the Oasis into contact with the rest of the world. Thanks to her work, the Berber needlewomen earn more than double the average of their husbands who work in agriculture.

Still in Egypt, but in the highly diverse and bustling reality of Cairo, Azza Fahmy is the owner of a brand of jewellery established over forty years ago in the East, which is also developing a presence in the West. Fahmy’s silversmithing company employs 180 workers including designers, artisans, trade representatives and consultants who work on the production and sale of around 11,000 handmade pieces with a turnover of over four hundred million dollars. Azza Fahmy, who comes from a middle class Egyptian family, began her work 50 years ago, when women were not admitted into silversmithing workshops. At the height of her success she has worked with distinguished international fashion designers such as the Londoner Julien Macdonald and over recent decades has set about creatively revisiting two ancient Arab traditions: jewellery and calligraphy. Today, after leaving the management of the company to her daughter Fatma Ghaly, Azza Fahmy devotes her time to training. In the field of European Union projects, she has

recently co-funded “Nubre”, the project of a design centre for training young European and Egyptian jewellery designers. Moreover, in association with Alchimia (Florence School of Contemporary Jewellery), she plans to found the Azza Fahmy Design Institute.

Jewellery and fashion design are sectors in which women are emerging rapidly in southern Mediterranean countries, introducing significant changes in the division of roles in relation with the recent past, when only men created while women assembled the pieces. Today, there are many female fashion designers and they have the important task ahead of them of affirming the dignity of their body and their sex in the field of visual communication, but not only here. In fact, fashion is a field that involves taking a position on the role of women and how it is interpreted: fashion designers create languages, signs and behaviours that can produce major changes in women’s lives but can also have a role of social control acting on the standardisation of socio-political impositions.

Sandi Hilal, an architect who works between Italy and Palestine, has analysed the “forms of spatial resistance” in Palestine. According to her, it is possible to understand society by analysing the relations between spatial and social organisation. She has undertaken diverse projects to improve Palestinian refugee camps, as a consultant for UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) within the programme *Camp Improvement*. The video “The Road Map”, made in the framework of her project with “Multiplicity” in 2003, documents the everyday life of a community of refugees, with special attention to how women use the limited public spaces available to them. The research has made it possible to restore diverse conceptual readings of local issues through audio and multimedia installations, performances, site-specific works, animations, photography and video. In 2007, with her Italian colleague Alessandro Petti, Sandi Hilal



Squid Tables and Ottoman Pebbles, by Nada Debs (Marinella Ferrara).

founded DAAR (Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency), an architecture collective and an art residence programme based in Bethlehem, which combines intellectual reflection practices with architectural interventions. The work of research and project development carried out over these years by DAAR has been exhibited in various museums and biennales all over the world and received the Prince Claus Fund Prize for Architecture (2010), as well as the Art Initiative Grant (2011) and was runner-up for the Chernikov Prize (2011).

The photographer and brave film director Jocelyne Saab works between Lebanon and Egypt. In the film “Dunia Kiss Me Not on the Eyes”, shot in Cairo, she approached social issues such as freedom of expression, dis-

crimination against women and female sexual mutilations (circumcision, which would affect a substantial part of Egyptian women) with a poetic language that exalts the elegance and sensuality of the Arab woman.

But the new design icon in the Middle East is Nada Debs. Born in Lebanon to a family of traders, she lived in Japan during her adolescence, studied interior design at the Rhode Island School of Design and spent some years in London before returning to Lebanon in 2000, after 40 years away. Today, she lives and works in Beirut, where she designs furniture and furnishing accessories, both mass produced and as limited editions under the brand “East and East” and which are distributed from New York to Geneva, as well as Dubai, Cairo, Amman and

Beirut. In her design language it is easy to see the influence of the diverse cultures in which she has lived: Japanese minimalism and rigour, American functionality or arabesque decorativeness, masterly combined in a mixture that winks both at tradition and contemporaneity, satisfying local and international taste. For the exhibition “The Future of Tradition-The Tradition of Future”, held at the Hausderkunst Museum in Munich in 2011, Nada Debs designed a large and apparently light concrete carpet made up of 28 monochromatic modular panels in which texts in Arabic following calligraphic tradition are engraved. Each of the modules is dedicated to a single letter of the Arabic alphabet, inlaid in white mother-of-pearl between the words engraved on the panel and all beginning with the same letter. The font used has been designed in collaboration with the Arab typographer Pascal Zoghbi. It is the same used for the coordinated image of Nada Debs and mixes the Japanese kanji calligraphic tradition with the Arab kufi tradition in a contemporary geometric design. The carpet currently forms part of the permanent collection of the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar.

In Amman, in Jordan, Sahar Madanat Haddad, graduate of industrial design from California State University in Long Beach, United States, in 2004, has accepted the challenge of developing the culture of graphic and product design in the Middle East as a freelance designer. Since then she has started working with local companies and conducting research to empower the disadvantaged communities in Jordan and abroad. She has acquired international fame winning prestigious international design contests, such as the award in the Hand Made Objects Design Contest, promoted by UNESCO and Alhoush, the Red Dot Award, IDEA and the A'Design Awards in Milan for the project “Heart Aid”, a portable heart defibrillator for old people that can increase life expectancy from 50 to 74%.

A diverse approach is that of the young Jordanian Samar Habayeb, graduate in architecture and economics from Tufts University in Massachusetts and with a master in ceramics from the Cardiff School of Art & Design in Wales. She is now the director and head designer of Silsal, a ceramics company founded 20 years ago by her mother Reem and her aunt Rula Atalla to preserve the local ceramic art. Having returned to Amman to manage Silsal, Samar has expanded her catalogue with a fresh line of accessories and has opened new lines of development in the company experimenting with ceramic forms based on tradition.

The examples in this brief summary, obviously not exhaustive, speak of female designers, more or less known abroad but influential in their own country: they are women with a marked aesthetic sensibility, who have managed to integrate their professional activity with a cultural and social commitment. They are women aware of their own rights, who question the stereotypes imposed by the cultures of origin, with difficult paths of integration within the community to which they belong and success in the labour world. They are proof of the great determination to enter debates and share ideas, to participate in the economic, social and cultural evolution of Mediterranean realities. Women are implementing important changes in the Mediterranean.

## Questions in Search of an Answer

At this point, as researchers of projects for the future, we should ask ourselves what the instruments are that enable the development of the aforementioned bottom-up phenomena to the point of making the status quo evolve.

Talking of bottom-up social phenomena, I consider it highly interesting to cite the results of some research carried out by the Università degli studi in Bergamo in African countries,<sup>5</sup>

which document a widespread phenomenon of micro-entrepreneurship in many rural areas, where we are seeing the emergence of micro-enterprises, in most cases run by a single person and female, of the most diverse kinds: textile activities, production of clothes, jewels or household articles, agro-food products and provision of services, for example catering services for events and parties. According to the studies, the success of this business phenomenon is important for several reasons: the efficacy of female micro-entrepreneurship lies in the capacity to relate and combine, very marked in women, and in a profuse commitment. In the realities examined, for a woman failure can have very significant social consequences. There is much at stake, along with the effort invested. Moreover, to overcome the difficult access to funding (women in Africa do not have much to offer as security), they resort to the *tontines*, a form of microcredit that women organise among themselves. To carry out this practice there are spontaneous associations in which the participants, paying a fee, contribute to a joint fund which is available to them cyclically to carry out their projects. The participation fee can also be very low. In this way, a real society is formed, outside the economy and the state, run with its own rules. This mechanism allows business activities to be implemented and grow.

Based on this example, can microcredit be taken up as a useful instrument for the development of women's business activities?

Probably, but we must not forget that today this kind of economic instrument has been renewed thanks to the application of communication technologies, with crowdfunding. This is an instrument for finding funding used to start up business projects and that utilises social col-

laboration through Internet. This instrument is spreading rapidly online with platforms dedicated to highly diverse field projects (journalism, cinema, television, art, music, photography, fashion, etc.). This is possible thanks to bottom-up fundraising, in which enthusiasts and people interested in the project proposed can participate. For example, the Iraqi photographer Tamara Abdul Hadi has presented an interesting project on the crowdfunding platform for photojournalists "Emphas.is": a real questioning of western stereotypes, in which all Arab men are seen as potential terrorists. She has also taken some photos of Arab men and compiled them into a presentation that offers a look at reality from unexplored points of view and offers a highly diverse and articulated image of the Arab man.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the main founder of the first crowdfunding website in the world is a woman, Vida Rizq. The Aflannah initiative, launched in 2012, seeks to change the way creativity is conceived in the Arab region, encouraging a new generation of filmmakers, software programmers, artists and designers to pursue their passion and realise their ideas. Another instrument to reflect on is the use of technologies.

We have realised that the role of the ICTs and micro-electric products (telephone networks and Smartphone, cable TV, Internet and social networks) have been fundamental in the resurgence of North Africa, whether for breaking the state monopoly on information or because they have been adopted as instruments of dissidence and mobilisation of mass protest. The spread of western models of life through the use of the media has meant that the Mediterranean population has become aware of their own being in the world, stimu-

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3. "Le donne in Africa: il ruolo della microfinanza", report by professor Laura Viganò, Dean of the Faculty of Economics at the Università degli studi in Bergamo, in the meeting of 2nd November 2010 at the Rotary Club Bergamo Nord.

lating the comparison between populations on the southern and northern coasts, with diverse identities, social issues and lifestyles. Moreover, the digital communication technologies are changing the way they work, embracing the open-source model, a new attitude to sharing and exchanging, potentially capable of stimulating a critical and proactive behaviour. There are increasingly more women with access to technologies and they use them to make contact, in order to become more familiar with different realities in the world.<sup>4</sup> This shows that there is a relation between the use of ICTs and the tendency towards democracy.

In this way, Mediterranean countries have reached diverse stages of that “silent revolution” (using the term coined by Claudia Boldin, Harvard economist) that leads women to have control over their own social role and to manage their own talent, bringing them closer to the “glass ceiling” that obstructs their promotion to decision-making levels.

At this point of reflection, what happens if we establish a hypothetical relation between lines of microcredit or crowdfunding, women’s design activities and the use of light and advanced technologies?

I am particularly referring to the technologies of rapid manufacturing that have introduced the seed of a potential revolution

of the methods and systems of manufacturing production. And I do so in reference to Neil Gershenfeld’s<sup>5</sup> project FabLab (abbreviation of Fabrication Laboratory) which, in diverse neighbourhoods and villages in the world, has made possible small-scale production laboratories that can offer local populations access to rapid manufacturing instruments, such as 3D printers, with the possibility of producing almost anything, according to their own needs and without having to resort to the normal circuits of mass and commercial production. The FabLabs stimulate the emergence of productive activities at a local level both in places distanced from industrial production and nearby, in which they are put forward as autonomous services independent of the classical logics of industrialised production. The potential of technologies today reveals new production and consumption modes that make artisanship current again and value creativity.

## Conclusion

Women’s design, microcredit lines and rapid manufacturing technologies make up an explosive mixture, groundbreaking given the effects it could have in the evolution of socio-cultural

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4. To explore the subject further, see: M. Ferrara, “The Mediterranean of Women. Evolutions and New Opportunities for Design in the Network Society”, *PAD*, No. 8, 2012, <http://padjournal.net/the-mediterranean-of-women/>

5. Neil Gershenfeld, professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and director of the MIT’s Center for Bits and Atoms. Gershenfeld’s thesis is that personal computers will soon be supported by personal fabricators, 3D printers that can set up true machines. Through his efforts, Gershenfeld has realised the dream of taking “light” technology where it did not exist to confront the main issues that represent a brake on development in these areas: access to information and to the instruments by common users. He has carried out several FabLabs throughout the world (in Norway, Ghana, Afghanistan, India, Costa Rica and Boston, among others). The FabLabs, in their original conception, are small places with instruments for rapid manufacturing and very easy to operate software. Distributed in parts of the world far from production centres, they have made it possible to create small electronic devices, wireless antennas, toys and other small objects using natural or artificial raw materials such as wood and polymers, and integrating electronic circuits made with the little machinery available. Today, there are 88 FabLabs in all the continents and they have evolved into digital manufacturing research centres, each one focused on one or more digital technologies. They are configured in diverse forms: some are experimental centres of training institutions, others authentic entrepreneurial subjects. Some are offered to designers and interested companies to facilitate digital production and the development of innovative collaborative design processes and management of the whole process of design-production-marketing of products. They can be used to carry out the last stage towards total automation of industry or towards the productive independence of industry.



models and for the development of territorial economies.

More so if we observe the phenomena from the perspective of business studies that indicate the entrance into crisis of the male breadwinner model faced with the emergence of the androgynous leadership model, based on an efficient combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Women are flexible and practical, and recognise the essential values of life. They have a marked sensibility for the social aspects of development, for care of the environment, for conserving resources. They prefer a fluent relation with the matter and nature of things. They pay attention to relations between people and especially to a more democratic style. All these qualities are important for building a “healthier future”.

Women should see any project or programme for the future, in addition to respect for the past and local cultures, as “an important contribution to solving specific problems and family wellbeing, and not only as a step towards their individual freedom” (Firino and Laurenti, 2012).

In the scenario I have described, can design associations have an important role?

Reasserting women’s creativity, promoting women’s participation in the future Mediterranean project, is as possible as it is desirable.

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6. According to some research undertaken in the 1990s (previously, studies comparing women and men had shown that there were indeed some differences although they were not very pronounced), women would prefer the transformational and interactive style, while men would prefer the transactional. Given that the transformational style is considered more efficient in contexts of rapid change, and the democratic style is also valuable, especially in terms of implementing reforms that require a broad consensus, we can deduce that women are more inclined to managing situations of major change and innovation. Research has shown a trend for women to consider the transformational style more desirable and therefore a positive orientation towards such a style.