

savoir faire and innovation: place-based design heritage in undergraduate education

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Abstract

At two European universities, undergraduate design students gain a complex understanding of design processes as a reflection of place as they study the ways that companies' operations and identity reflect the community's culture, people and heritage. Through collaboration, students experience centuries-old arts, skills, and design processes, while the companies' traditional *Savoir faire* (it. Saper fare: "knowing how to do things") benefits from students' innovations in manufacturing and marketing; this sustains the design businesses and their design heritage.

In Florence, students in a Product Design course collaborate in Joint Labs with advanced craftsmanship manufacturers in Tuscany production districts, experiencing and promoting connections between historical artisanal practices and innovative processes. Similarly, design students in Paris work with culturally significant "heritage" companies to bring them innovative marketing and branding insights.

International markets are becoming more attuned to the context of products' origin (Morace 2003), giving the "vocation" of a place greater significance and highlighting the place-specific processes that imbue the object's design. Collaborations with design students enable culturally significant companies to innovate in improving and promoting their place-based aspects, and sustaining their heritage.

Keywords: savoir faire, intangible cultural heritage, undergraduate design education, learning by doing

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Introduction: University of Florence Design Campus (DIDA)

Home furnishings in Italy are primarily manufactured by a group of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These companies have undergone profound transformations in their manufacturing processes, particularly by the progressive juxtaposition of innovative technologies and traditional place-based craft processes. The result is “advanced craftsmanship”: the use of computer-controlled machinery to replicate manual processes derived from genius loci heritage.

In 2012 the DIDA design research team (PhD, post-doctoral and faculty researchers) created a program of Joint Labs to train undergraduate students in “advanced craftsmanship,” through educational paths that connect traditional craftsmanship knowhow with innovative manufacturing processes.

After students acquire theoretical preparation, the DIDA department connects new departments in the partner companies with teams of students who are able to interact with artisanal craftsmen as well as with innovation sectors of the supply-chain. These enclaves within the companies create a win-win situation: the company improves the advanced craftsmanship and R&D sectors, while the academia trains students through direct interactions with the production chain. In addition, connecting the University’s advanced research with the SMEs’ artisanal savoir-faire brings fresh energy into the manufacturing process, improving the companies’ time to market and preserving the craftsmanship knowhow through the generations.

Methodology: joint lab process at DIDA

1. Student selection and internship organisation – about one month

The DIDA research team selects students from the third year of the bachelor program in Industrial Design and from the second year of the master program in Design and Fashion Design System. The students receive a preliminary theoretical preparation, followed by an internship experience of 6 months in a partner manufacturing company. In the internship phase, the research team select appropriate technical equipment for each Joint Lab. All costs are shared between the University and the partner company. If possible, the University and the partner company apply jointly for a public grant promoting manufacturing innovation (i.e. Horizon 2020—SME Instrument/Smart Factory program: Executive Agency for SMEs, European Commission).

2. Theoretical preparation for student team at the university – about one week

The DIDA research team provides theoretical training for the Joint Lab students at the University, arranging lesson topics according to the needs and culture of the partner company.

3. Team preparation of students and tutors (PhD Students or Researchers) – about two weeks

After the theoretical preparation at DIDA, the selected student team and tutors begin training in the partner company, under the supervision of interested departments: these are usually design or other technical departments, or communication or logistics sectors. The first week of the training period is dedicated to introducing tutors (usually PhD or Post-doc researchers) to the company environments and to the basic practical Savoir Faire of the manufacturing chain. In the second week, students are introduced to the environment and manufacturing know-how. In this phase, the appropriate technical equipment is made available to the students.

4. Joint lab starting point – with the support of internal technical department

After these training phases, the technical departments of the company give assignments to the student teams and the work starts. The tutors work with the involved company departments to create a calendar of revisions and delivery of student works. The tutors also prepare a joint lab report, and present best-practice tutorials every two weeks.

Outcomes: joint labs at DIDA

Following this methodology, DIDA created several different Joint Labs. Some examples are:

- RED Joint lab with Baldi srl – bronze and crystal manufacturing (Florence/Empoli area – Italy)
From September 2011 to December 2014

- REM project with Savio Firmino srl – high-end craftsmanship for luxury furniture (Florence area-Italy)
From September 2013 to April 2015
This Joint Lab used reverse-engineering processes to create a digital archive of manufacturing components (about 10,000 items), to define new product shapes and to preserve the craftsmanship know-how.
This resulted in strong time-to-market improvement.
- E.craft with **Luisaviaroma.com** – global e-commerce website offering a selection of the best craftsmanship companies (Florence – Italy)
The Joint Lab team selected the best manufacturing companies of Made In Italy to be included in the exclusive **Luisaviaroma.com** website. The students provided the selection, the styling strategy, and photo post-production. Project tutor for was Ramona Aiello, PhD student at DIDA University of Florence.
- Italian Genius – Crystal and bronze company network in connection with an international luxury dealer.
From January 2014 to April 2015
The Joint Lab created a collection of vases inspired by famous renaissance palaces and historical personages. The student team—guided by tutors—provided historical research, design references and thematic scenarios to establish a product story. The Italian Genius Joint Lab created the “Experiencing Galleria Palatina” vases collection.

Introduction: undergraduate program in strategic design + management, Parsons Paris

In 2005 the *Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant* (Living Heritage Company, or EPV) label was established as a mark of recognition of the State, to reward French firms for “the excellence of their traditional and industrial skills.”

The EPV website details these firms as having the following characteristics:

- “They own specific economic heritage resulting from their production experience.
- They put into practice rare skills that draw on a mastery of traditional or technically advanced techniques.
- They have ties with a particular region.”

In short, EPV-designated firms possess traditional and/or innovative *Savoir Faire*, and identify with a region: a sense of place. Parsons Paris works with several EPV companies, giving undergraduate students a context for and experience of place-based *Savoir-Faire*. After theoretical work to understand the importance of *Savoir Faire* and sense of place to the branding of the firms (and the branding of French cultural heritage), students in the Bachelor of Business Administration program work with partner firms to create innovative marketing/branding strategies.

Methodology: Parsons Paris Collab Course traditional making/innovative branding

In January 2016 students enrolled in a 15-week collaborative course titled “Collab: Traditional Making/Innovative Branding.” This design studio/symposium enables students to collaborate with site-specific companies, exploring and developing innovative positioning, branding and marketing possibilities for the partner companies.

Students observe the daily activities of merchandisers and designers, and research the historic and cultural factors that have informed the company’s processes, mission and image. External research visits enrich the research methodologies. Students then draw upon their research to explore and develop innovative positioning, branding and marketing possibilities for the partner companies.

1. Theoretical preparation of student teams at Parsons Paris – about three weeks

Within the classroom, the instructor leads students to explore the role of history and culture in the development of the companies’ positioning and branding. Students also gain a general understanding of

- Cultural heritage (including UNESCO’s safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage)
- Place-based heritage
- Transmission of *savoir-faire*

2. Visual research of partner firms by student teams – about four weeks

Students observe the daily activities of a merchandiser and designer, and research the historic and cultural factors that have informed the company’s processes, mission and image. Their research includes

- On-site visits to observe partner companies, recording with sketching, photography and notes
- On-site research into the partner companies
- Off-site research in museums and libraries

3. Proposals to partner firms by student teams – about two weeks

Working in teams on individual subject companies, students identify preliminary branding objectives and marketing strategies.

4. Implementation of strategies – about two weeks

Student teams create look books and written proposals, introducing culturally-relevant marketing and branding innovations. Each team develops a communication strategy designed to promote specific aspects of the Savoir-Faire of the partner company—its brand character, personality, and/or positioning—to a targeted audience. Proposals may be for a website, a brochure, or a campaign that highlights this communication strategy.

5. Presentations and assessment – about two weeks

The course continues until mid-May 2016, so no outcomes are yet available.

Conclusions

Intangible cultural heritage and place-specific Savoir Faire are complex entities, with multiple aspects for students to consider. The examples here of the Joint Labs the University of Florence and the collaborative course at Parsons Paris present multiple methodologies for understanding these entities. A combination of theoretical contextualisation, on-site observation and training, and introduction of innovations in manufacturing and marketing give students a richly layered experience. Also, partner firms benefit from the students' innovative and fresh approaches. Their combined efforts contribute to preserving and extending place-based savior faire and its culturally significant products.

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