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# Design associations in Latin countries: Tradition, identity, and new perspectives in the ICT era

## Associações de Design nos países latinos: tradição, identidade e novas perspectivas na era das TI

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#### Abstract

The aim of this work is to analyse the topic of professional associationism in the field of design. This is a phenomenon which has contributed in defining several aspects, not just in regulatory terms, of the "trade" of designer, encouraging its rapid dissemination in the contemporary society and making it one of today's most appealing professions at international level. Its priority is to see whether there is a Latin tradition which has historically marked the evolution of associationism. We will also try to understand whether the contamination between the sphere of design and the world of art and craft can be considered among those constants that can be used to interpret the issue. Lastly, but equally important, we will analyse the possibility of creating a system of shared connection based upon current information and communication technology, in order to build up a relationship between many subjects. We think that the use of an "institutional" tool (such as university research) to read and understand the phenomenon, can help to shed light on the different aspects of the discipline.

**Key words:** design associations, profession, tradition, identity, knowledge network, ICT.

#### Resumo

O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar o tema do associativismo profissional na área do design. Este é um fenômeno que tem contribuído para a definição de vários aspectos, não apenas em termos regulamentares, do "negócio" do designer, incentivando sua rápida disseminação na sociedade contemporânea e tornando-o uma das profissões mais atraentes de hoje a nível internacional. Prioriza-se neste artigo a investigação sobre a existência de uma tradição latina, que tenha historicamente marcado a evolução do associativismo. Tentaremos também compreender se a contaminação entre a esfera do design e do mundo da arte e artesanato pode ser considerada entre essas constantes que podem ser usadas para interpretar a questão e, por último, mas não menos importante, analisaremos a possibilidade de criar um sistema de conexão compartilhada baseada em tecnologias da informação e da comunicação atual, a fim de construir uma relação entre diversos assuntos. Pensa-se que o uso de uma ferramenta "institucional" (como a pesquisa universitária) para ler e entender o fenômeno pode ajudar a lançar luz sobre diferentes aspectos da disciplina.

**Palavras-chave:** associações de design, profissão, tradição, identidade, rede de conhecimento, TI.

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A young sector lacking a consolidated and independent disciplinary body, design has always needed to create a specific professional and cultural legitimisation. An obvious sign of this process is the constant parallelism between the development of the discipline and the birth and affirmation of the design associations. The reason seems obvious: in the absence of other institutional tools, professionals united by the same trade and by the same interests, come together to guarantee a regulated level of quality to their actions. In the wake of the Second World War, in Europe and in South America, associations and networks of organisations and institutions uniting the representatives of the design project, considered as a professional activity, but also as culture, criticism and debate, began to spring up. This has never stopped and has actually progressively increased to the present day, so much so as to represent a possible gauge, in the absence of other scientific and systematised tools, for the assessment of the state of the art, its contemporary declinations, the players involved and its various characterising aspects.

To investigate the issue, the contribution presents a historical-critical analysis of international associations, from its origins to the present. There is a recognition of the current state of affairs in the Latin countries, via the mapping of the associations and furthering of significant case-studies and, last but not least, a proposal for the networking of the contents and know-how of the single subjects. This could be the first step towards developing a more complex project, which aims to supply a tool for the professional, academic and institutional world which, for now, is influenced by a poor connection between similar entities and organisations.

The systematisation of the associative bodies could create new and virtuous opportunities for global exchange, which help to share the cultural wealth and complexity of a professional knowledge.

### **Professional associations as a union of designers, craftsmen and artists**

The development of the first associations for the defence, promotion and dissemination of the work of the designer follows an evolution which travels at the same pace as the industrial revolution. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century England the "societies of arts" progressively acquired a central role in the development of innovation for the industry. Examples are the Dublin Society for Promoting Husbandry and other Useful Arts (1731) and the Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce of London (1754), economic societies founded by private citizens who inaugurated a season which witnessed the flourishing of similar institutions in various European countries<sup>1</sup>, in Russia and in America (Castelnuovo, 1989). Unlike the manufacturing system or that of the academies of art, economic societies play the role of mediators

of the modern needs that professionals and commissioners are called upon to interpret in the light of the industrial progress underway and its repercussions on everyday life.

Completely different is the situation in the Latin countries, where, while on one hand a delay in the industrial revolution can be noted in countries like Italy, Spain and Portugal; on the other there continue to be different models which are influenced by state-sponsored manufacturing, such as France.

The continuous tension between design as an artistic-craft activity, and design as a science, even when the industrial revolution was over, has evident repercussions on the world of associationism. The historical development of professional associations can be indeed considered as a different key element to read the "common" and "canonical" history of industrial design. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, once again in England, the Arts and Crafts movement was influenced by a "romantic" revival of the ideas of the guild and witnessed a series of initiatives which stimulated the work of individual enterprises led by the capacity to govern processes and techniques associated with craft-related know-how. Then of course there is the influence which, thanks to Hermann Muthesius (Prussian delegate at the German embassy in London between 1896 and 1903), the Arts and Crafts exercised on the birth of the most famous association of the history of international design: the Deutscher Werkbund (1907), a union of the craft, industrial, theoretic-ideological and pedagogical forces with the aim of refining the aesthetic aspect of everyday objects. A combination of strengths which in 1914 revealed a conflict of interests between the worlds of craft and industry, and which consequently declines, leaving an important heritage, not only in the country which generated industrial rationalisation and the role of design applied to industry.

During the years leading up to the First World War, within the scope of the debate on the reform of design in England, the focus shifted from the role of craftsmanship to that of industry, an innovation sanctioned in 1915 with the foundation of the Design and Industries Association (Dia). It was modelled on the Deutscher Werkbund and rode the failure of the 1912 Arts and Crafts exhibition, with the aim of promoting the best in art, industry, craft and commerce, under the slogan "nothing need be ugly"<sup>2</sup>.

Immediately after the Second World War, the mounting desire for definition of design and, consequently, the pertinent profession, led to the birth of new types of associations.

### **The birth of modern associationism in the field of industrial design**

From the mid-1950s, Europe and South America witnessed the birth of associations that grouped together the players involved in the design scene: professionals, com-

<sup>1</sup> We can find a similar situation, for example, in Scandinavia, where the birth of economic societies in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century unhinges the model of the guilds (Castelnuovo, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> One of the leading points of the Manifesto of the Dia was: "What is needed at the present time is the gathering together of all the several interests concerned with industrial production into a closer association; an association of manufacturers, designers, distributors, economists and critics. It is, therefore, proposed to found a Design & Industries Association which shall aim at closer contact between the branches of production and distribution and.... explain its aims and ideals.... to the public" (Design & Industries Association, s.d.).

panies and schools. The war speeded up and exasperated normal needs, generating the multiplication, between 1945 and 1947, of conferences, exhibitions and debates focused on the problem of reconstruction, not only in its mere physical sense, but also at cultural level. This created a very restricted circularity of the elite that governed the processes and which inevitably regained control of the encoding of technical know-how, already common before the war (Peruccio, 2005).

In Italy, for example, the awareness of the professional autonomy of the designer matured very late, after the 1950s, both in independent institutional and pedagogical terms. In this context, the culture of the architects takes on the task of highlighting, from the project viewpoint, the values of an industrial culture which, up until then, had been given little consideration, even in terms of material culture. Italy had no personalities of the calibre of Gottfried Semper, Muthesius, nor did it have associations like the Deutscher Werkbund or schools like Bauhaus. With the end of the Second World War, designing useful objects became the only possibility for architects and designers. This was an emergency scenario in which the Castiglioni brothers, Marco Zanuso, Angelo Mangiarotti, Vico Magistretti and Ettore Sottsass took their first steps. Meanwhile, Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Carlo Mollino, Ignazio Gardella and Luigi Caccia Dominioni continued working. In their midst the whole country was characterised by a much segmented labour, based on a traditional artisan format.

The Aiap (Associazione Italiana Artisti Pubblicitari, which was later to become Associazione Italiana Creativi della Comunicazione Visiva), conceived in 1945, was formalised only in 1955. The Adi (Associazione per il Disegno Industriale) was set up in 1956, followed, more than ten years later (1969), by the Aipi (Associazione Italiana Progettisti d'Interni).

This happened in Italy, but there were different situations in other countries. The professional system in Northern Europe, for instance, had been influenced by the formative models inspired by the Arts and Crafts, the Fine Arts and the engineering schools, while South America was considerably affected by the Ulmian influence, thanks to the presence of figures like Tomás Maldonado and Gui Bonsiepe in the formative course of the individual countries (Anceschi, 1984; Burdek, 2008; Fernández and Bonsiepe, 2008; Carniel and Maldonado, 2009).

However, it was during this period that there international bodies were created with a view to systematise the situation at global level. One such body was the Icsid (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design). From the meeting held in London in 1957 at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), attended by delegates from Denmark, France, the German Federal Republic, Holland, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan and India, it has now passed to a membership of over 150, from 50 countries representing a community of 150 thousand designers<sup>3</sup>. The regulatory principles remain substantially unchanged, and can be summarised by the slogan: "non-government organisation born to protect the interests of the profession of the designer and promote the discipline of industrial design both at local and international level" (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, s.d.). However, from the emphasis initially placed on the professional character of the organisation, as indicated in the first title of the Icsid, The International Council of Societies of Industrial Designers, became necessary, as of the first assembly held in Stockholm in 1959, following pressure by certain big companies operating at the time, to extend the spectrum of the members, replacing the last word of the acronym with Design. During that same year, one of the first official definitions of "industrial design" was developed at the above-mentioned assembly. This was later followed by that created by Reyner Banham presented at the assembly held in Ottawa in 1967, by a third and more sophisticated version by Maldonado in 1969 and others in 1971 in Barcelona, until the last one accepted by the extended community of designers<sup>4</sup>.

About ten years after the establishment of the Icsid, the basin of design professionals witnessed the birth of the Icograda (International Council of Graphic Design Associations)<sup>5</sup> and the Ifi (The International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers)<sup>6</sup>, which then joined forces in the Ida (The International Design Alliance) in 2003<sup>7</sup> (Formia and Peruccio, 2008). It was during this period that there was a progressive acceleration of the situation at global level. Just think that between 2000 and 2010 in the Latin countries there was an approximate 80% increase in the number of professional design associations.

<sup>3</sup> "The idea to create an international body representing the interests of industrial designers was first presented by Jacques Vienot at the Institut d'Esthétique Industrielle's international congress in 1953. A more formal commitment on the part of his colleagues and counterparts at other national design associations was made at a further international meeting in 1955. But it was not until June 29, 1957 at a special meeting in London that Icsid was officially founded, under the name of the International Council of Societies of Industrial Designers" (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, s.d.).

<sup>4</sup> This definition is published in the web site of Icsid.

<sup>5</sup> Icograda is the world body for professional communication design. Founded in 1963, it is a voluntary assembly of organizations concerned with graphic design, visual communication, design management, promotion, education, research and journalism" (International Council of Graphic Design Associations, s.d.).

<sup>6</sup> Ifi connects the international community in order to further the impact, influence and application of the design of interiors, promotes global social responsibility, and raises the status of the profession worldwide. Ifi was founded in 1963, as a not-for-profit, limited liability Company, to expand the international network of professional Interior Architects/Designers" (International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers, s.d.).

<sup>7</sup> "The International Design Alliance (IDA) is a strategic venture between the international organizations representing design. The alliance was created by founding partners Icsid and Icograda and ratified by their respective General Assemblies in September 2003. In September 2008, the IDA welcomed the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) to the alliance as the third partner" (International Design Alliance, s.d.).

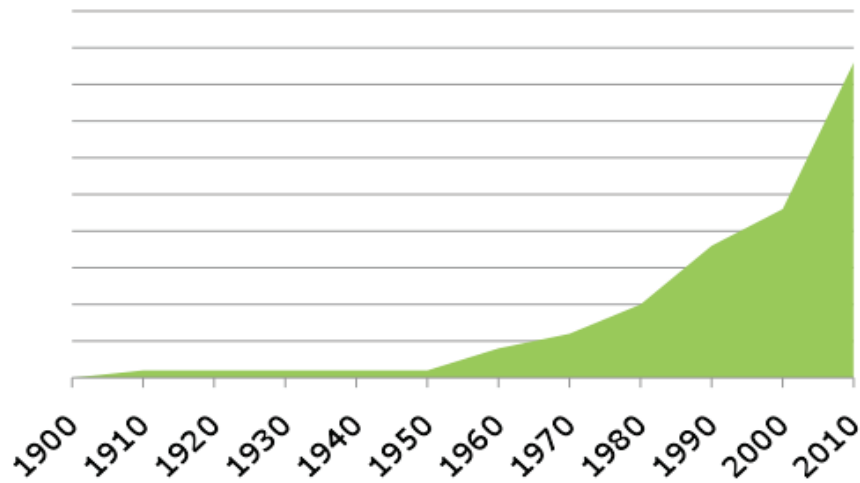


Figure 1. Historical evolution of design associations in Latin countries.

### Associationism in the Latin countries: a map

The mapping of the associations of professional designers<sup>8</sup> in the Latin countries<sup>9</sup> involved a research which considered the associations still operating on the territory today, excluding all the “historic” cases of associations which are no longer active. Considering the lack of literary fonts on the topic, the first basin of information was the Internet network. The preliminary recognition was followed by a check and analysis of the data that emerged through direct contacts with the leading protagonists taken into consideration. Having outlined the area of investigation and established the research tools, a series of reading parameters were identified to: help investigate the dimension, the nature and the thematic orientation of the situation; developing a critical thought on the overall situation that emerged; and formulating tangible hypotheses for future development.

The first census identified over 100 subjects. This figure allows us to assume that the phenomenon has now become widespread: amongst all the Latin countries included in the analysis, there is at least one professional association, but the average is about three. There are also several more active contexts with more than 15 associations; this is particularly common in bigger South American countries, such as Brazil and Argentina. More anomalous is the case of Spain, while the figure is partially influenced by the fact that the historical association of the Fad (Foment de les Arts i del Disseny) of Barcelona comprises a considerable number of “sub-associations”. Reading these figures comparatively in respect to the geographic dimensions, it emerges that cities like Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires are authentic catalysts, in that they concentrate about half of the associations present in the respective countries within their boundaries. A number which is even higher than the number of associations located within the entire European

countries, such as Italy and France. The possible explanations of this phenomenon have probably much to do with the presence of a more consolidated history of industrial design, on one hand, particularly in Argentina, and with more vital economic, social and cultural conditions on the other, particularly in Brazil.

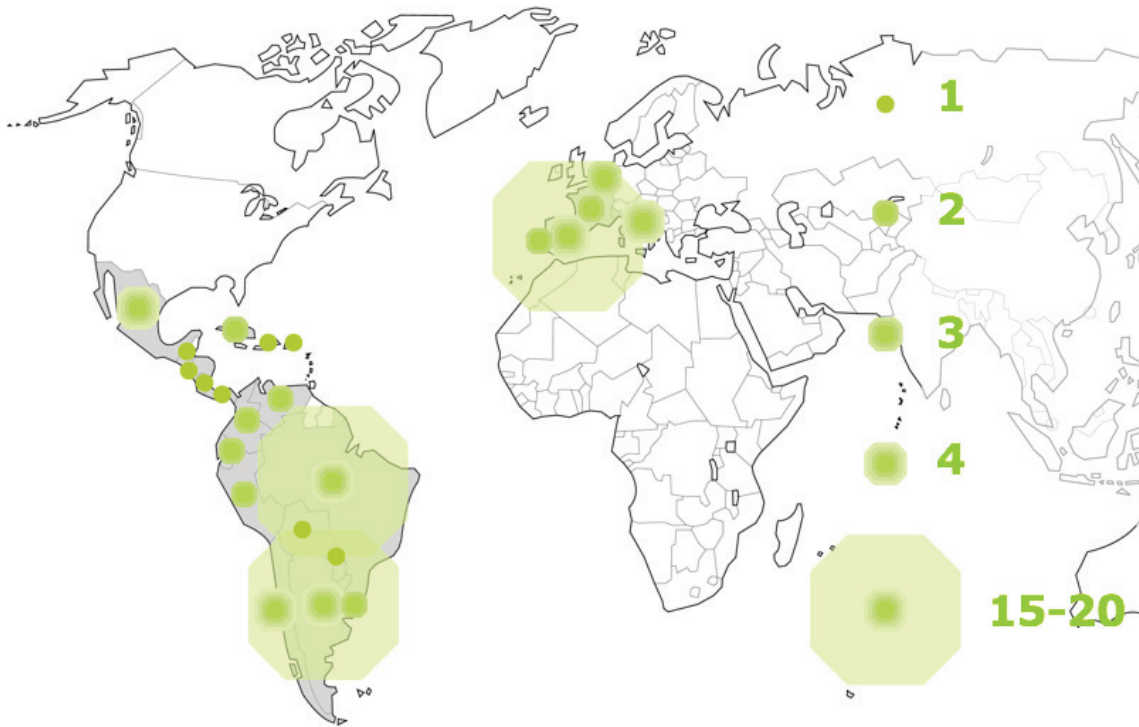
However, this parameter must be read in relation to the number of subjects present in the single associations. Therefore a dimensional scale has been created, split into five levels: associations with a maximum of 50 members, those with between 50 and 100 members, between 100 and 200, between 200 and 300, and between 300 and 400. These are joined by 2 macro-levels of associations with between 1000 and 1600 members and between 3500 and 4000. We ought to point out that the nature of the members is more or less constant: most of the associations are made up of professionals but there is also a minority open to teachers, students and companies<sup>10</sup>. From this second level of interpretation, it emerges that the small number of associations present in certain countries is offset by the high number of members, such as in Italy, France and Mexico.

The successive parameter regarded the explanation of the disciplinary areas represented by the associations. The drawing up of an initial classification confirmed a substantial breakdown of the disciplinary geography into three macro areas: product design, interior design and communication design, where the product category is decidedly dominant. Then an initial articulation of the processes of the discipline emerges, in which we can find areas of strong development (such as web design, packaging design, fashion design), or territories of disciplinary or transversal boundaries (such as associations of design, art and handicraft, or associations of design historians). If however the thematic three-way breakdown can be seen in almost all the countries analysed, there are some cases

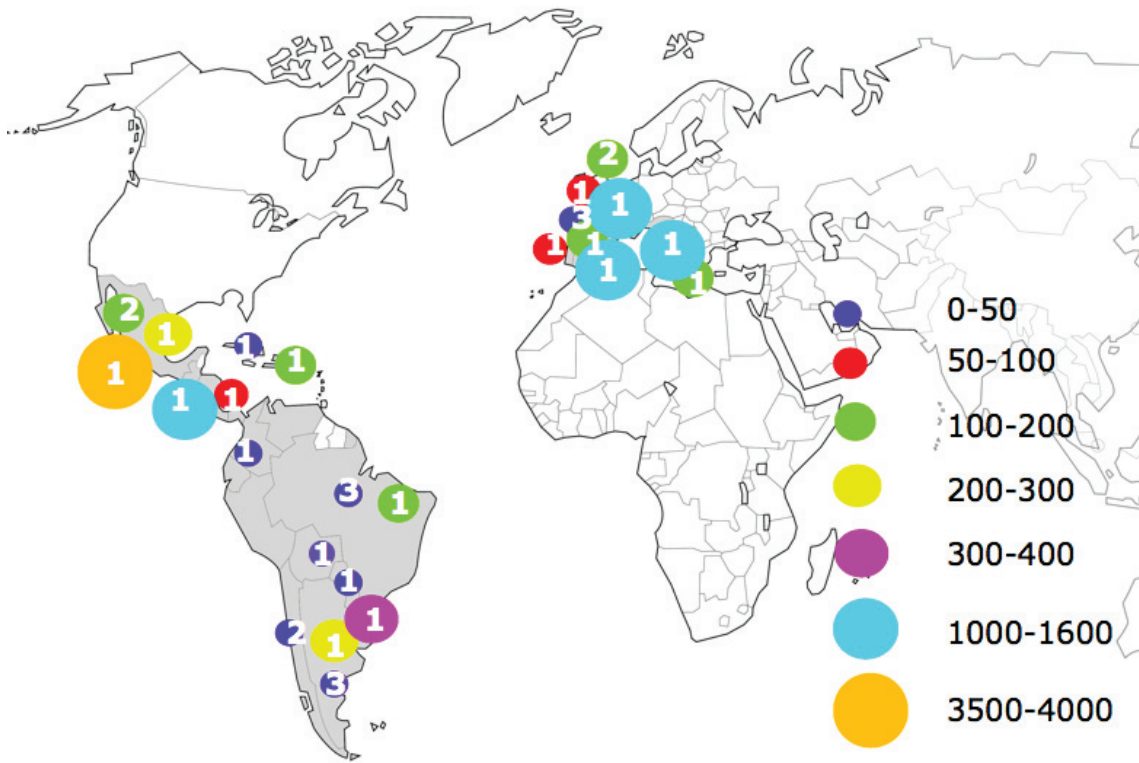
<sup>8</sup> To limit the research, the mapping included only the professional associations, which means associations formed mainly by designers.

<sup>9</sup> The Latin countries included in the mapping are: Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain (for Europe); Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, French Guyana, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay and Venezuela (for Latin America).

<sup>10</sup> For example, in Italy, the Adi included, originally, professionals and companies and, later on, also students (De Fusco, 2010).



**Figure 2.** Locations and geographies of design associations in Latin countries.



**Figure 3.** Players and numbers of design associations in Latin countries.

in which the dynamics that historically led to the birth and dissemination of industrial design have left evident signs. In Argentina, the associations that unite professionals operating in the graphics and visual communication sector are clearly superior to the others.

In the development of the research, an attempt was made to check the complexity of the aims pursued by the associations included in the census. Through a study of the most used words in the presentation of the single associations, a series of shared key concepts emerged, lead-



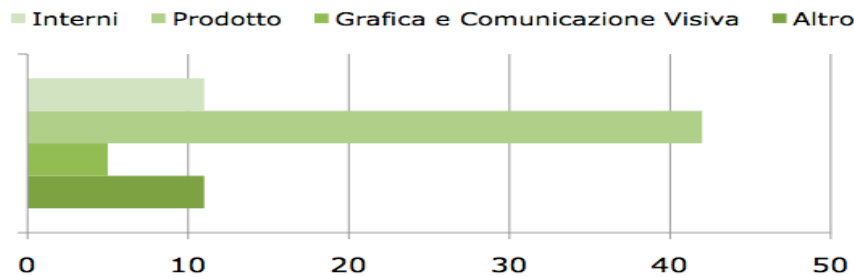


Figure 4. Disciplinary areas of design associations in Latin countries.

ing back, albeit partially, to the main aims: representing collective interests; disseminating knowledge; educating, through meetings, congresses, debates and conventions; perfecting and upgrading; facilitating internal communication; cooperating with other entities; providing incentives for studies and researches; promoting design; divulging design within an institutional, social and entrepreneurial context; respecting professional ethical values; developing and defending the discipline; strengthening the profession; developing processes; creating spaces for communication with other disciplines; generating culture.

In conclusion of this representation, it seems useful to define certain referential constants to help focus on the analysis carried out up to now.

First of all, it is easy to prove how the phenomenon can be broken down into two macro-categories: countries characterised by the presence of polycentric associations distributed throughout the whole territory with respect to the disciplinary skills, opposed by countries in which it is possible to find a more detailed presence of stronger, and consequently dominant, associations. This does not however dispute the common tendency towards a sort of “association-related sprawl”, in other words the multiplication of associations, many of which are very small, in all countries. The recent success of the discipline, demonstrated particularly by the progressive setting up of training courses in all the Latin countries, is undoubtedly a key to the interpretation of this topic. However, the most obvious risk is that there might be an isolation of the single associations, transformed into a sort of “archipelago” of practices and knowledge. This risk has already been tackled in the past, as proven by the creation of international associations which, while retaining their local identities, attempt to provide a network dimension. This is the case of the Asociación Latinoamericana de Diseño (Aladi), founded in 1980 in Bogota, which unites entities in the territories of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela. The limit of this organisation lies in the nature of the subjects involved: it is not an association of associations, its members being heterogeneous, ranging from training centres to trade associations and public and government entities (Asociación Latinoamericana de Diseño, s.d.).

A similar case can also be found in Europe, where the Bureau of European Design Associations (Beda) was formed in 1969 as the European representative body for professional designers’ associations (Bureau of European

Design Associations, s.d.). However, this does not offer a thorough picture of the European phenomenon, as it comprises only the associations and entities that voluntarily join.

The need to create controlling bodies that comprises several subjects with a view which refers to the current information and communication technologies has also been demonstrated by the recent birth, in Brazil, of the Portal Design Brasile (Pdb), a project accomplished with the patronage of Senai, Sebrae and MDIC, which has drawn up a list of professional associations that operate in the design sector. The portal is coordinated by the Paraná Design Centre and aims to build a network – the Brazil Design Network – for the integration, union and cooperation of the various activities in the territory (Design Brasil, s.d.).

These case studies also show a recent trend which leads us to reflect on the nature of the phenomenon. The historical associations are now flanked by a rich panorama of different organisations, such as museums and design centres, which cover a similar role that overlaps with that of the associations and could induce a possible expansion of the mapping.

## Associations 2.0

With a view, on one hand, to virtuously implementing the communication between local traditional and international networks and, on the other, to favour the acceptance of disciplinary contaminations, we propose a trajectory of study and innovation defined, using a metaphor of Web, “2.0”. The analysis carried out so far has revealed the opportunity to convey a system dimension to associations. To create new and virtuous opportunities for global exchange, helping to share the cultural wealth and complexity of a professional know-how with uncertain boundaries, the intention is to provide a tool for the professional, academic and institutional worlds which are influenced, for the moment, by a poor connection between similar entities and organisations.

The sequence of actions scheduled to achieve these aims envisages, first and foremost, the completion of the research and the possibility to extensively disseminate the results. This first level of analysis could then be transformed into a system of shared connection based on current communication technologies, in order to structure the relationship between the subjects. The on-line platform of the Latin professional associations aims to index and structure the single contents via a system of shared

metadata, capable of generating and stimulating countless relationships. With the aid of Internet languages ("Web 2.0" or more recent) it is possible to integrate the platform with innovative instruments which facilitate the active participation of users, encouraging the circulation and exchange of information.

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