

Design Solutions 4 Crafts Development in Egypt: A Strategic Approach to anticipate challenges and to optimize choices

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ABSTRACT

Design in Egypt must be shifted from imitating design in developed countries that focuses on design as a synonym for styling and producing luxury products, towards concentrating on the needs of the Egyptian society. In the context of craft development in Egypt, different activities of design must be redirected strategically toward meeting the needs of the local people both as consumers and as producers. In so doing, designers must work actively on improving craftsmen productivity in order to increase their income as well as to interpret people's needs into appropriate and affordable products. Then at certain point these products must be connected efficiently with niche markets.

This paper argues that recent design thinking can support designers with new strategic insights and methods to anticipate challenges, to optimize the choices, and to synthesis the desirable solutions in the future. This in turn will lead to empowering local people and integrating them in a sustainable economic situation. To ensure effective cooperation and participation at the national level, designer's efforts must go hand in hand with other disciplines and must be sponsored by different stakeholders to promote development in specific craft sector. This paper is mainly concerned with answering the following questions: What kind of design solutions could be expected to empower local craftsmen? Who exactly can participate in producing this solution? How could designers support national policy towards sustaining crafts development efforts in Egypt?

KEYWORDS

Design solution, anticipate challenges, optimize choices, empower local craftsmen, crafts development in Egypt

ملخص البحث:

إن التصميم في مصر يحتاج إلى إعادة النظر فيه وتعديله من التقليد الأعمى للتصميم في الدول المتقدمة التي ينصب جل تركيزها على التصميم كمرادف للرفاهية، تجاه التركيز على إحتياجات المجتمع المصري. وفي سياق تطوير الحرف في مصر، يجب إعادة توجيه العديد من أنشطة التصميم المختلفة إستراتيجياً نحو إشباع إحتياجات الناس المحليين بنوعيهما؛ منتجين ومستهلكين. وذلك عن طريق عمل المصممين بفاعلية على تطوير إنتاجية الحرفيين بهدف زيادة دخلهم، وفي نفس الوقت تأويل إحتياجات المستهلكين إلى منتجات تتناسب مع هذه الإحتياجات وبأسعار مناسبة. ومن ثم يمكن ربط هذه المنتجات بكفاءة بالأسواق المتخصصة لاحقاً.

ترغم هذه الورقة البحثية أنتفكير التصميم الحديث يستطيع دعم المصممين بطرق علمية جديدة تساعد في توقع التحديات، وفي المفاضلة بين الإختيارات، وفي تكوين الحلول المنشودة في المستقبل. هذا بدوره سيؤدي إلى تمكين المنتجين والمستهلكين المحليين ودمجهم في ظروف إقتصادية مستدامة.

ومن أجل التأكيد على فكرة المشاركة الفاعلة والتعاون المثمر على المستوى المحلي، يجب أن تتضافر جهود المصممين مع المجالات الأخرى وأن تكون برعاية جميع الأطراف المستفيدة من أجل تطوير قطاع حرفي بعينه. لذلك ستقوم هذه الورقة البحثية بطرح الأسئلة التالية للإجابة عليها:

ماهي الحلول التصميمية المتوقعة لتمكين الحرفيين المحليين؟ ومن هم الأطراف المنوط بهم المشاركة في إنتاج مثل هذه الحلول؟ كيف يستطيع المصممين دعم السياسة القومية نحو إستدامة جهود تطوير الحرف في مصر

INTRODUCTION

Traditional design education focuses only on producing products characterized with beautiful forms, usually by using new and exotic materials and targeting rich people. The main attention of design is very limited to the product and its form. Unfortunately, in so doing, most Egyptian designers are imitating the footprint of western designers and paying no attention to the social or the economic context of their target audience, who are going to produce or use these products or even if they really need these kinds of products or not. In other words, they ignore design “in context” or getting a deeper understanding of what really needed to satisfy real needs not “fabricated wants” as Tony Fry (2009) called them in his book Design futuring.

Therefore, design in Egypt must be shifted from imitating design in developed countries that focuses on design as a synonym for styling and producing luxury products, towards focusing on the needs of the Egyptian society. Designers must go deeper to understand complex problems and learn new methods to improve their skills to a new level. New skills and tools from different disciplines are very much needed and there are many recent design books full of new methods. Design Thinking process & Methods written by Robert Curedale, published 2016, is one of these important books. It is considered a textbook in leading design schools and leading universities, such as Stanford, Yale and Harvard because it explains innovative 150 design methods and includes many informative international case studies. In his book, Curedale states that recently

“large corporations including Pepsi and IBM announced major initiative to train their staff and adopt Design Thinking”. (p. 5)

He stresses that design thinking

“creates practical and innovative solutions to problems ... drives repeatable innovation and business value ... [it] can be used to develop a wide range of products, services, experiences as well as design and business strategy”. (Ibid, p.5)

Roger Martin, dean of a well-known management school in Toronto, calls for integrating design and business skills. He states that

“It’s time to embrace a new value proposition based on creating – indeed, often co-creating—new products and services with customers that fill their needs, make them happy, and make companies and shareholders rich” (qtd. from Holston 2011, p. 8)

Recently, these and many other references encourage rethinking design education and practice in order to upgrade design thinking towards more responsible and effective one. To date, design books focus on the positive impact and contributions of design solutions in many fields to motivate different stakeholders to collaborate with designers in solving various complex problems and this paper will refer to a few of them briefly.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper argues that recent design thinking can support designers with new strategic insights and methods to anticipate challenges, to optimize the choices, and to synthesis the desirable solutions in the future. This paper is mainly concerned with answering the following questions: What kind of design solutions could be expected to empower local craftsmen? Who exactly can participate in drawing up this solution? How could designers support national policy towards sustaining crafts development efforts in Egypt?

CRAFTS DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT

Beginning with craft definition, Apple dictionary defines it as “an activity involving skill in making things by hand”. (Digital Dictionary) This definition is relatively abstract and limited craft to a hand activity. It ignores any cultural, economic or social dimension. Whereas traditional crafts, according to Darlie O. Koshy - an executive director of the National Institute of Design Ahmedabad - are,

“... innovations of yesterday. Crafts define not only the cultural moorings but also the search for economic sustenance. The craftsmen derive their inspiration, innate wisdom and skills not from books but from nature and their surroundings. Crafts reflect the immense creativity of ordinary people and their quest for self-expression and fulfillment. Just as human evolution, crafts also evolve over time by mixing and churning influences and events. A country creative history is decipherable from the metal, pottery, textiles, and scores of other crafts.” (Ranjan et al. 2005, p. 17)

In contrast to the dictionary’s definition, Koshy’s definition is a holistic and a comprehensive one. It deals with craft from a philosophical perspective. It considers craft as an innovative and a dynamic process that not only evolves over time but also reflects self-adaption of diverse challenges and mirrors various events to meet or satisfy specific needs.

A third definition perceives craft as

“an effective vehicle for self-development and for sustainable [self-dependent] generation for much of our population living in difficult economic conditions.” (Ranjan et al. 2005, p. 22)

This definition is a succinct one and emphasizes the cultural and economic aspects. It pays more attention to craft as an added economic-value for poor people.

In the context of crafts development in Egypt, if we adopt the second and the third definition

of craft, then the target of design solutions will be built upon three issues: first developing the skills of craftsmen to increase their productivity; secondly producing high quality products or goods to enhance the quality of craftsmanship; and thirdly improving their economic situation to empower them and let them get out of poverty.

In the past, craftsmen were in direct contact with their consumers and their products were customized to their needs. Today, in a challenging and an emerging market-driven economy, this direct contact did not even exist anymore. (Ranjan et al. 2005) Production process is more complex and interrelated with different marketing and consumption factors. Traditional craft's products, consequently, need to be redefined and refined according to the customer's need besides other emerging market needs.

In this case, adopting traditional way of design thinking is not only focusing on a very limited type of design activities such as: designing a concept, choosing a material and finally coming up with a prototype, but also not sustainable, because it usually separates production process from the consumption process. This linear design approach ignores producer's requirements and consumer's needs in their design process. It is not sustainable since it causes problems and will lead to inappropriate design intervention. Sometimes, it may have a good start and introduce an innovative product but on the long term it will definitely cause different problems in various dimensions, as designers are not aware of the interrelated connections between each phase due to the lack of seeing the big picture. (See figure 1)

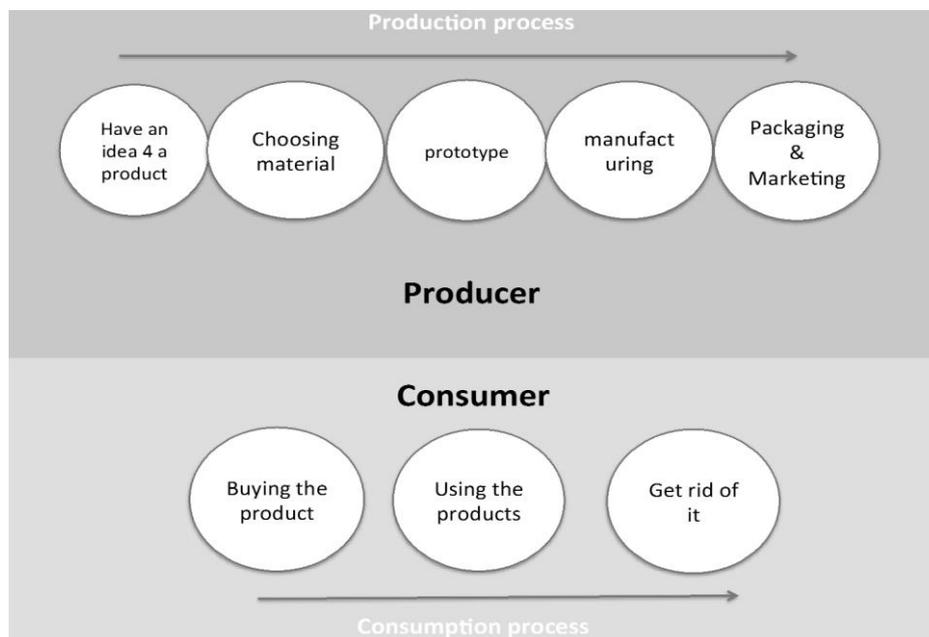


Figure 1: A linear production and consumption process

PRODUCT LIFECYCLE APPROACH (PLA)

Product Lifecycle Approach enables designers to see the big picture while they are concentrating on one single phase. The lifecycle of any product consists of distinct phases related to two interconnected processes: production and consumption. It starts with designing a concept after having a vague idea for a new product, required in the market. The second

phase is about choosing environment friendly materials, then testing the concept in a prototype phase, and finally manufacturing the product, while packaging is the primary preparation phase for marketing and selling the products. The sixth phase concerns with consumers who chooses to buy the product and then the next phase focuses on the use of the product and user-experience. The final phase is when the consumer decides to get rid of the product. (See figure 2)

In this cycle, each phase in itself is a complex issue and needs a lot of efforts to be carefully completed because it is affected by a previous one and affects a later phase, whereas the whole process is an evolving process. This means, depends on the nature of the product, the used product will be re-cycled or up-cycled and therefore another cycle will start with its own eight phases and so on.

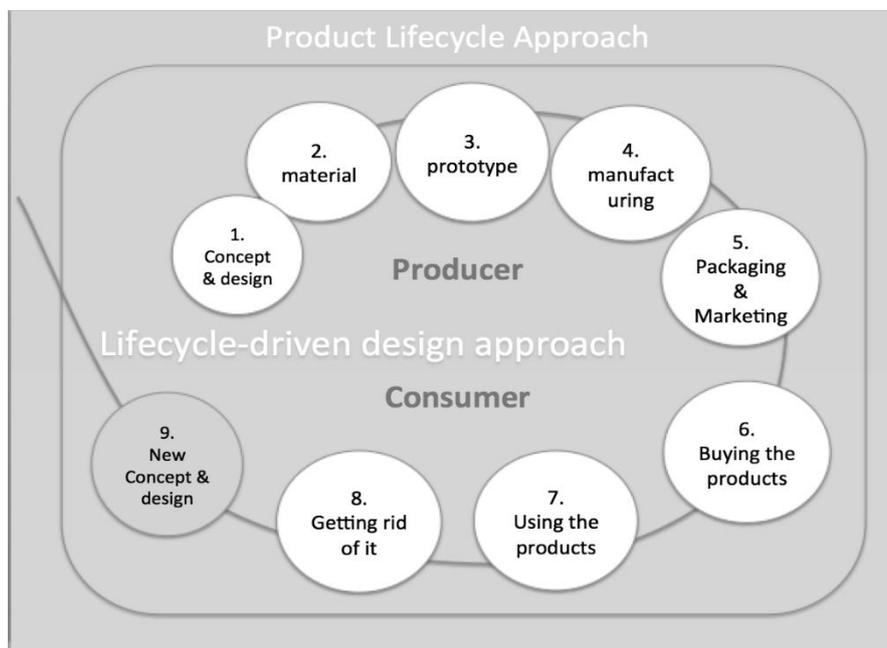


Figure 2: Lifecycle-driven design approach

The entire design process is driven by PLA. Design has a direct and an indirect influence in the product lifecycle and different types of design activities will be recalled according to various targets. Design has a direct influence on the first five phases (from 1 to 5) as it has been explained above, whereas design participation has an indirect impact on the following three phases (from 6 to 8). Considering choosing and buying the products (phase 6), if designers will take the economic aspect into their consideration while they are designing the concept and choosing the materials, then the product will be affordable and will compete in the market in a good manner (Low cost strategy). Design focus in this case is about designing affordable products (see figure3). Another aspect to be considered is the user experience while they are using the product, whether they have a positive or a negative experience, this kind of feedback is very much needed and appreciated to develop the product in order to improve the user experience.(See figure4)

Getting rid of the product after the consumption phase requires creative ideas, whether to recycle the product or up-cycle it, to avoid waste and environmental pollution (see figure 5).

Recycling a product means converting it into reusable material to create new product, but up-cycling a product refers to reuse this product to do other functions than the original one. For instance, in imm Cologne Exhition 2016, the tuk-tuk, a three-wheeled motorized vehicle, was up-cycled into a bar-counter (furniture-piece).

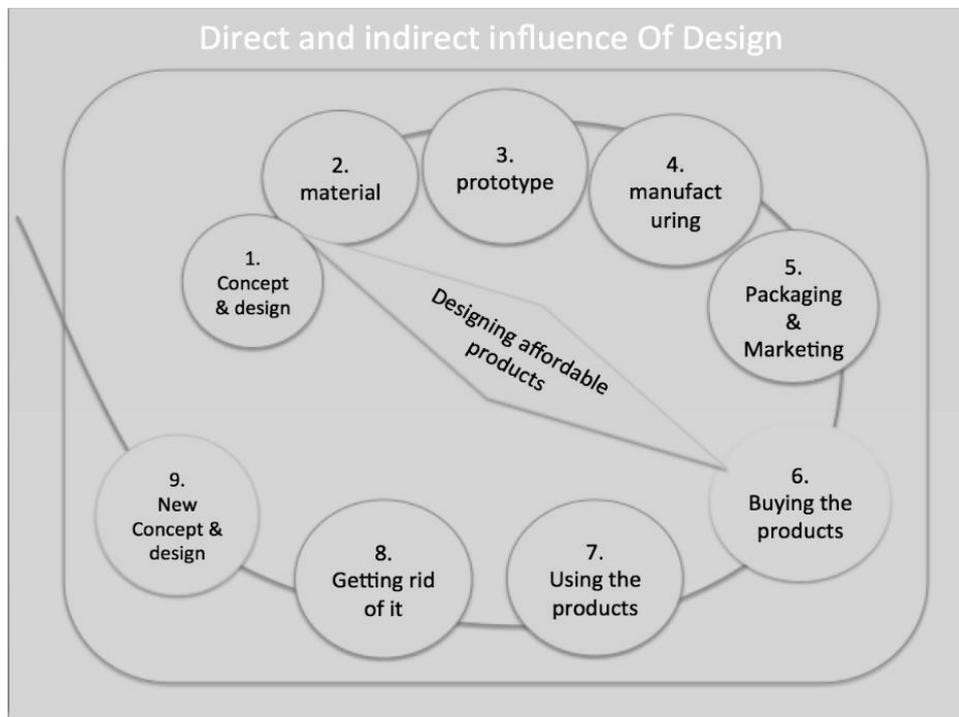


Figure 3: Designing affordable products

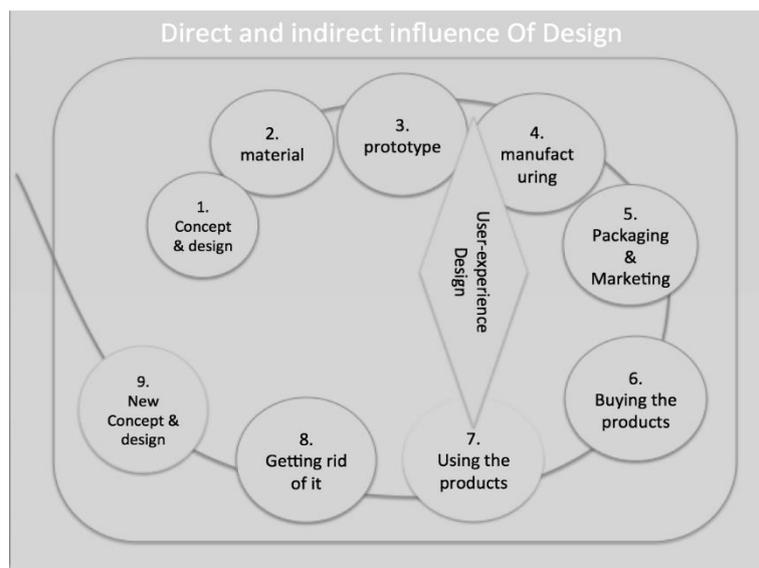


Figure 4: User-experience Design

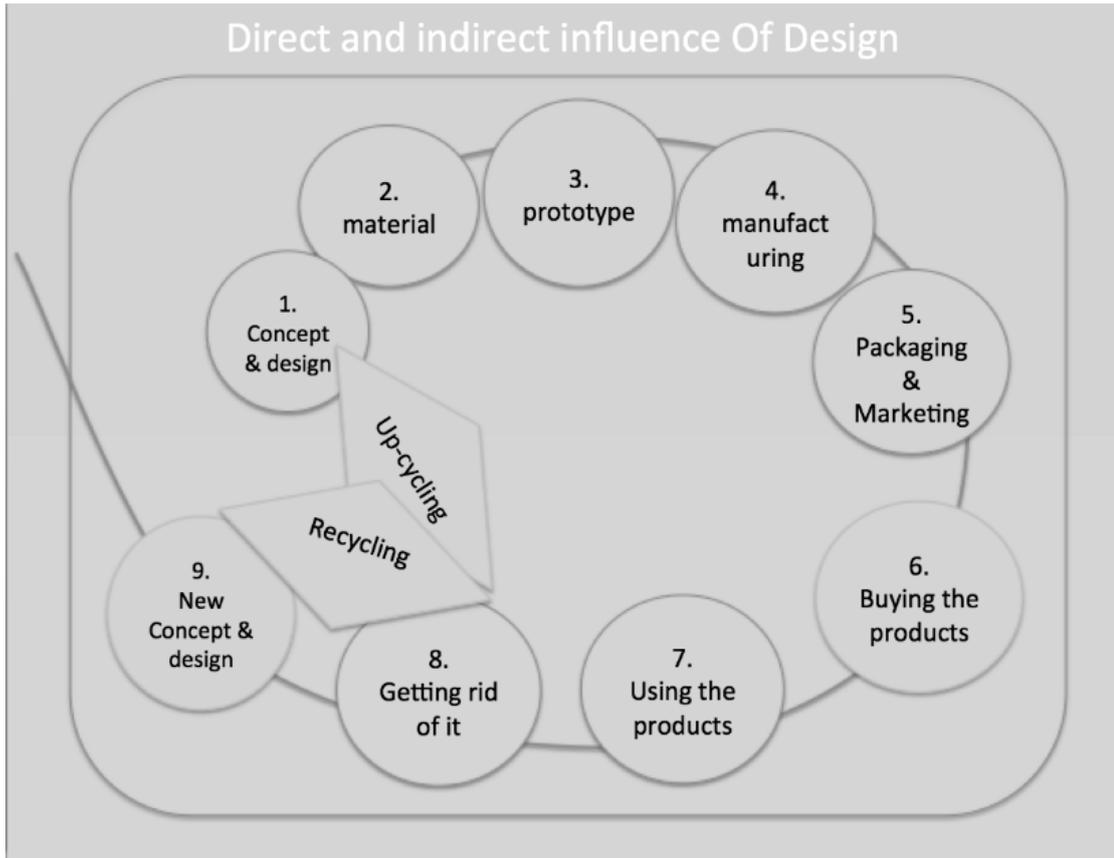


Figure 5: Up-cycling and Recycling Design

WHAT KIND OF DESIGN SOLUTIONS COULD BE EXPECTED TO EMPOWER LOCAL CRAFTSMEN?

To develop a particular sector, it is important to differentiate two levels of design intervention, a strategic level and an operational level. The first level is a proactive approach and more comprehensive. It focuses on anticipating challenges and formulating strategies that articulate the long-term impact of any design intervention or activity. The latter is focusing on producing tangible solution/outcome in form of products, services or/and systems. It focuses on optimizing design impact by producing design solutions that add value. Both of them are significant in any developing process to achieve a specific goal. (See figure 6)

To empower local craftsmen, design can play different roles to optimize choices and build bridges between consumer, producer, and stakeholders. Design solutions are win-win-win solutions. This means the design team should approach stakeholders to collaboratively design programs that target capacity building of craftsmen and this in turn will empower them. Another role to be played by design team is to design solutions in the form of products, services and/or systems to meet and satisfy a particular need. Approaching stakeholders in this case will lead to affordable solutions. Connecting craftsmen with local consumer in a social business model to market their crafts and goods will be the third win-win situation. (See figure 7)

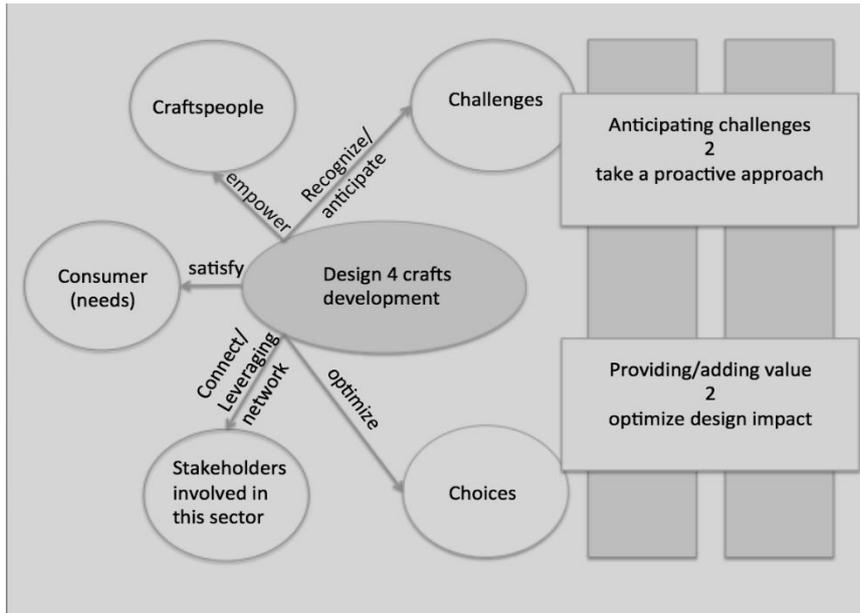


Figure 6: Different levels of design interventions

To determine what kind of strategy should be adopted and in which context, Anshoff’s matrix is a powerful tool to support designers in their strategic task. H. Igor Anshoff (1965) has developed his well-known matrix as a strategic framework for future growth in his book Corporate strategy to support corporate management.

According to Anshoff’s matrix, there are four different strategies: Penetration strategies, market development strategies, new product development strategies, and diversification strategies. These strategies are built upon two types of product and market: An existing or a new product/market. (See figure 8) These strategies, as explained by Ikeda (2008), are: “Penetration strategies involve marketing existing products to existing markets; market development strategies involve marketing existing products to new markets; new product development strategies involve marketing new products to existing markets, and diversification strategies involve marketing new products to new market.” (qtd. from Ikeda 2008, p. 374)

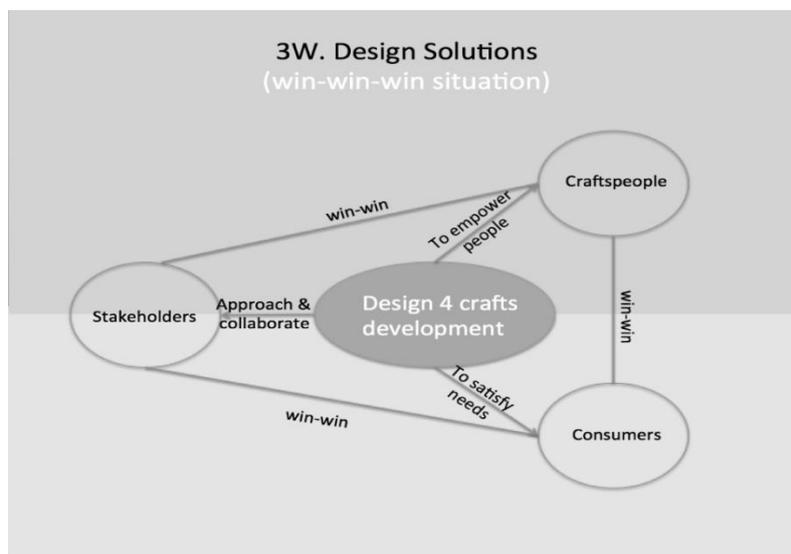


Figure 7: 3W. Design Solutions

It is important, however, to know that each strategy has different activities to be achieved in order to reach a predetermined objective. For example, if penetration strategy has been chosen to market an existing product in an existing market, then design intervention will focus on styling, advertising, and promoting to improve and differentiate the product. Whereas, adopting new product development strategy will require designing a new product after doing research to identify new needs of a specific target group. (i.e. needs and demands assessment). In addition, market forces analysis will be needed to break in to another market area to avoid any unexpected challenges or minimize the risk. Market forces analysis will be needed to collect relevant information on diverse aspects: market segments, switching costs, and revenue attractiveness.

In a competitive marketplace, design thinking, process and methods can enable a valuable competitive advantage for craft development and has much to offer. “Potable light” is an Indian solar handbag and an outstanding example of design solution that creates a business model for empower craftspeople and communities. (Pilloton 2009, p. 37) It illustrates the fruitful collaboration between design, craftsmen, consumer and stakeholders.

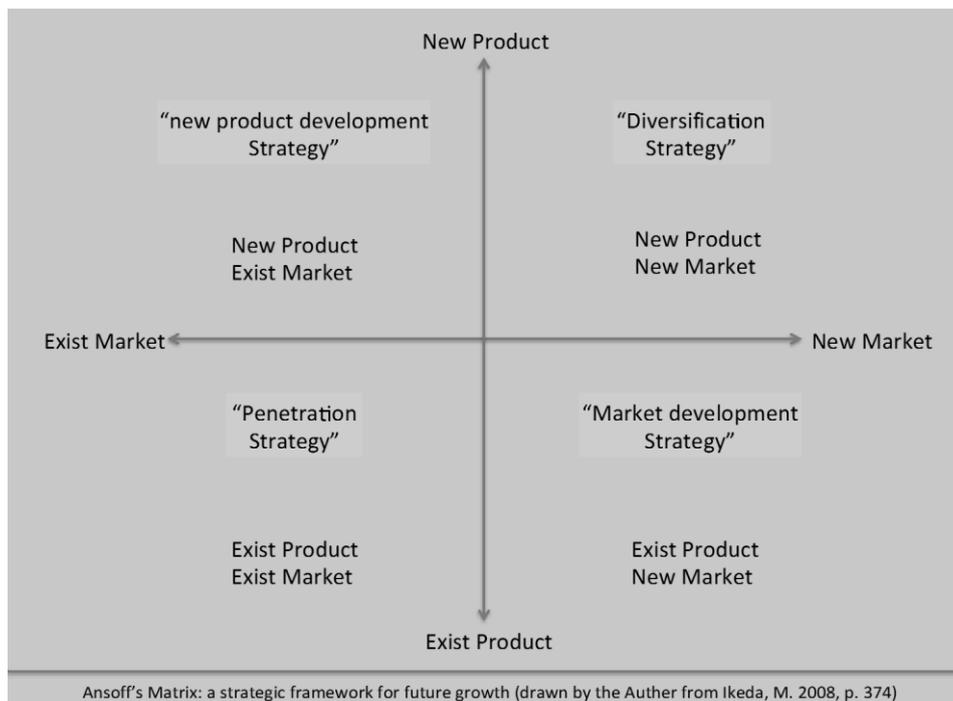


Figure 8: Ansoff's Matrix. a strategic framework for future growth (drawn by the author from Ikeda, M. 2008, p. 374)

WHO EXACTLY CAN PARTICIPATE IN PRODUCING DESIGN SOLUTION?

Optimizing the relationship between producers, consumers, and stakeholders in a project-based design approach is an optimal goal in any collaborative process. To produce design solutions, the design team needs first to map all stakeholders to approach the right partners. Stakeholders refer to a group of people with different backgrounds and same interest or concern. In the context of Egyptian crafts development, there are numerous stakeholders from

two different backgrounds: Academic research institutions and governmental & non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Cairo University, Helwan University, Kafrelsheikh University, and South-Valley University are the few examples that represent the academic research institutions that are interested in developing handicrafts people and products. Whereas, Cultural Development Fund (CDF) from Egypt Ministry of culture, Science & Technology Development Fund (STDF), and Egypt The Future NGO are targeting crafts people's development and empowerment. (See figure 9)

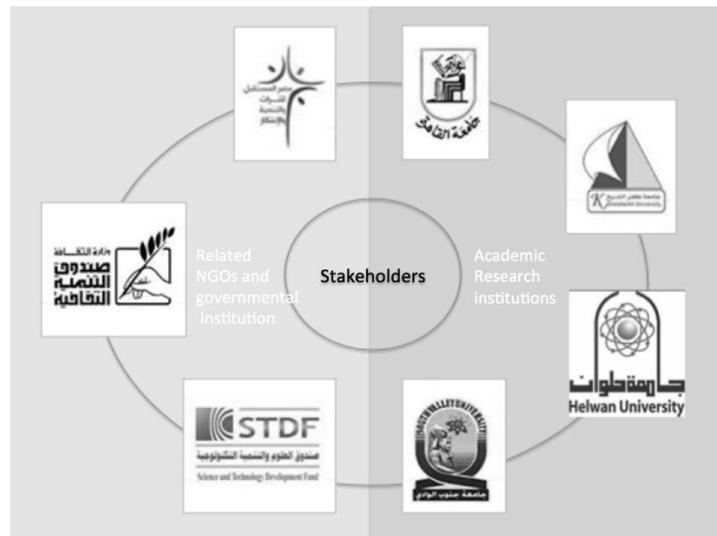


Figure 9: Different stakeholders can participate in producing design solution

HOW COULD DESIGNERS SUPPORT NATIONAL POLICY TOWARDS SUSTAINING CRAFTS DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS IN EGYPT?

To ensure effective collaboration and participation at the national level, designer's efforts must go hand in hand with other disciplines and must be sponsored by different stakeholders to promote development in specific craft sector. Different activities of design, therefore, must be upgraded and redirected strategically toward satisfying the needs of local crafts people and local consumers. In so doing, design intervention will be in three separate directions. First, designers have to improve craftsmen productivity by designing an appropriate capacity-building program. Secondly, interpreting people's needs into appropriate and affordable products is another task. Then at certain point these products must be connected efficiently with niche markets. (See figure 10)

Handmade in India(2005) is a best practice example that illustrates a productive collaboration between design schools, Indian handicrafts, and governmental and non-governmental institution to document the development process of different local handicrafts. It represents an innovative landscape of various crafts in 530 different places in India.

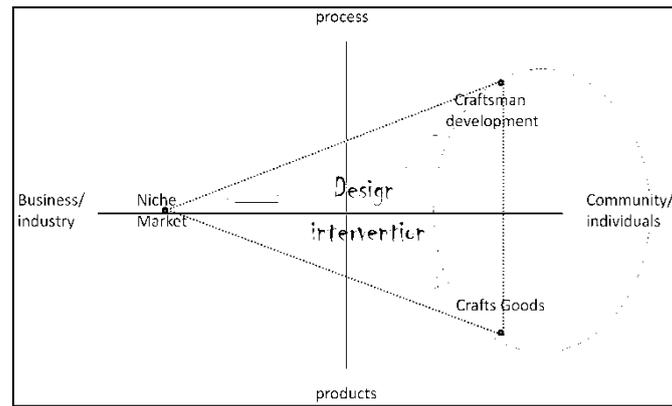


Figure 10: A model of design intervention for crafts development (El Aidi 2015, p. 162)

CONCLUSION

The broad aim of this paper is to raise awareness of new methods and recent capabilities of producing innovative and sustainable design solutions for crafts development. Anticipating challenges and optimizing choices are the most strategic potentials of design approach nowadays to participate actively in the development process.

To explain answers to the raised questions in this paper, many figures have been illustrated to visualize that up-to-date design thinking can strongly contribute to the development of the crafts sector. Two successful examples from India have been introduced to emphasize that it is only possible to empower craftspeople if the design team is given an appropriate chance, enough time, and sufficient money to intervene collaboratively with stakeholders in a project-based research. Stakeholder's awareness of the potential of design thinking as well as the value added by design will lead to innovative and sustainable solutions.

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