

# ENJOY THE DIFFERENCE

a design journey in Kenya



Man and  
Humanity  
Masters

DESIGN  
ACADEMY  
EINDHOVEN

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# ENJOY THE DIFFERENCE

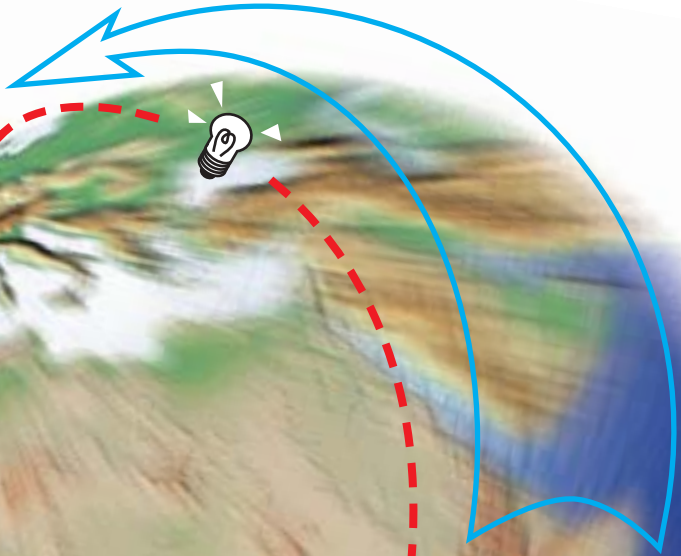
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Undugu Society of Kenya in Nairobi  
The Product Design and Development Center  
Ziwa Creations in Kisumu  
Machakos District Cooperative Union

# Enjoy Lucy Orta

*"But before we reach the majestic shores of the Promised Land, there is a frustrating and bewildering wilderness ahead. We must still face prodigious hill-tops of opposition and gigantic mountains of resistance. But with patient and firm determination we will press on until every valley of despair is exalted to new peaks of hope, until every mountain of pride and irrationality is made low by the levelling process of humility and compassion; until the rough places of injustice are transformed into a smooth plane of equality of opportunity; and until the crooked places of prejudice are transformed by the straightening process of bright-eyed wisdom."*

These words of Martin Luther King Jr. describe vividly the arduous journey of the eight Man & Humanity design students on their first 'Global' assignment to Kenya from October to December 2002

Our first-year intake of students to the newly inaugurated master program battled to overcome the hardships of living and coping in a new culture, with a totally different mindset. They were patient and determined to collaborate and innovate with the limited resources, and through a process of humility and compassion they have set the challenging pace for the master education, by designing models for sustainable opportunities and contributing to social awareness in underprivileged craft communities in developing countries.

Man & Humanity proposes an intensive program of design studies that respond to the increasing concerns of Globalisation. It seeks a profound engagement from creative individuals who wish to re-address the role of the designer in this context and apply ideas to designing products and systems that help sustain the future of our planet and its inhabitants at the same time taking into account ethical standards of production and distribution that respect Man and the Environment.

We interrogate the direct effect of design on people's livelihoods and consider our responsibility towards communities we encounter during the projects. The master education develops a full awareness of the humanitarian and environmental context, and the long-term strategies and methods that can be applied to move development forward, for the betterment of our planet.

Man & Humanity designers are world citizens with their heart in local problems, each with different histories and approaches to design. The first trimester in a series of three thematic: Global, Local and Personal, is by far the most challenging of our program.

GLOBAL assignments take place in a developing countries, working closely with communities that are affiliated with Fair Trade practices. Here the designer lives together with and shares experiences with local craftsmen. They experiment with alternative materials, methods

and techniques and respond to impulses that arise in the daily lives of groups and individuals.

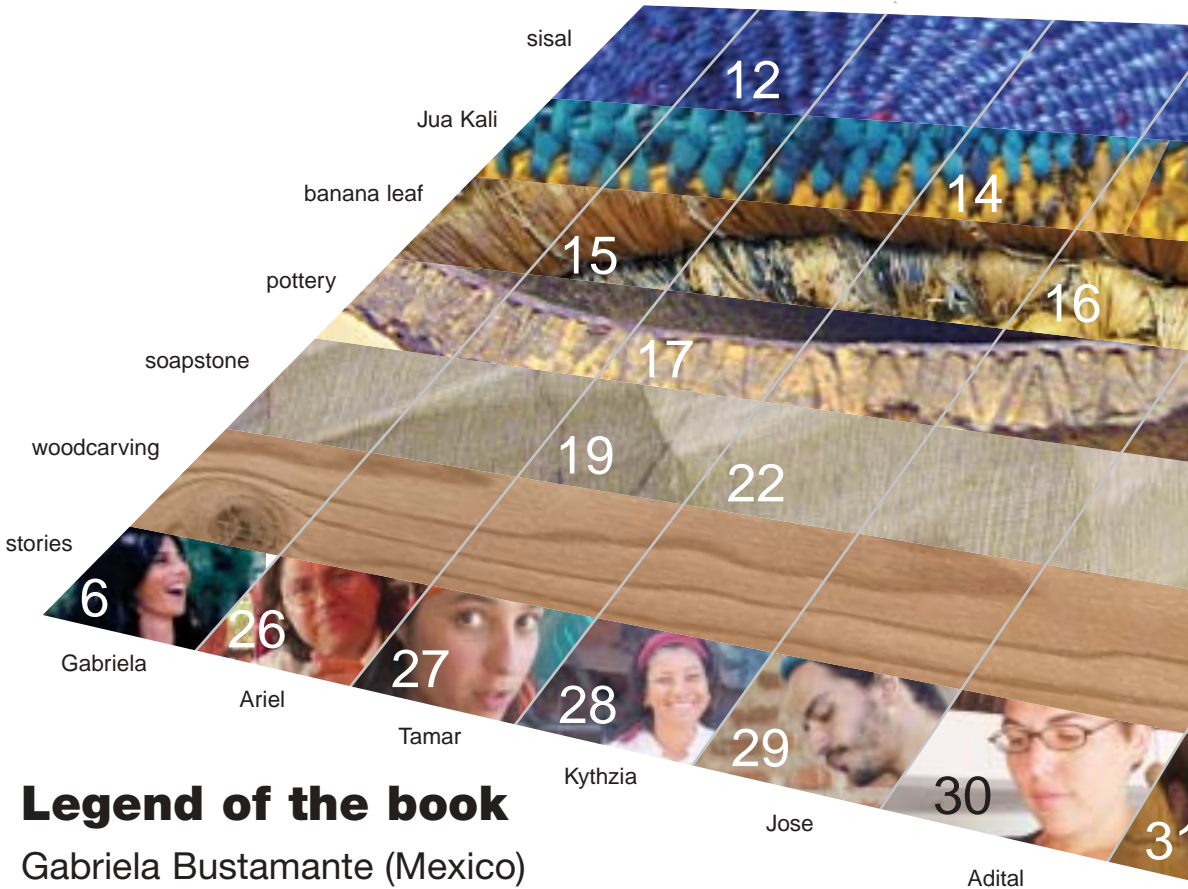
LOCAL considers social and cultural diversity in the local community particularly the marginalized groups such as children, old people, ethnic minorities, handicap or refugees, and challenges the designer to develop new structures, services, and goods that can help to empower these communities in innovative ways.

PERSONAL delves deeply into the psyche of today's western world. By holding a mirror to reveal and confront our egotistical tendencies: a lack of compassion, missing imagination, absent emotion, lack of time. Our aim is to design these underdeveloped states back into a positive and transformed existence.

So much terrain to cover in such a short space of time!

We do not seek to define the borders of 'Promised Land', the Man & Humanity master program is unprecedented, but we are fully aware that there is not time to loose if we are to at least smooth out and cultivate some of the expanses for generations to come.

*Lucy Orta  
Head, Man & Humanity  
Design Academy Eindhoven*



# Legend of the book

Gabriela Bustamante (Mexico)

To complete this book, I was inspired by maps. I had been thinking of how a map of this project could have the same effect as a 16th century-map, when maps became the symbol of European power. In a time in which spatial imagery had acquired a new meaning and a new strength.

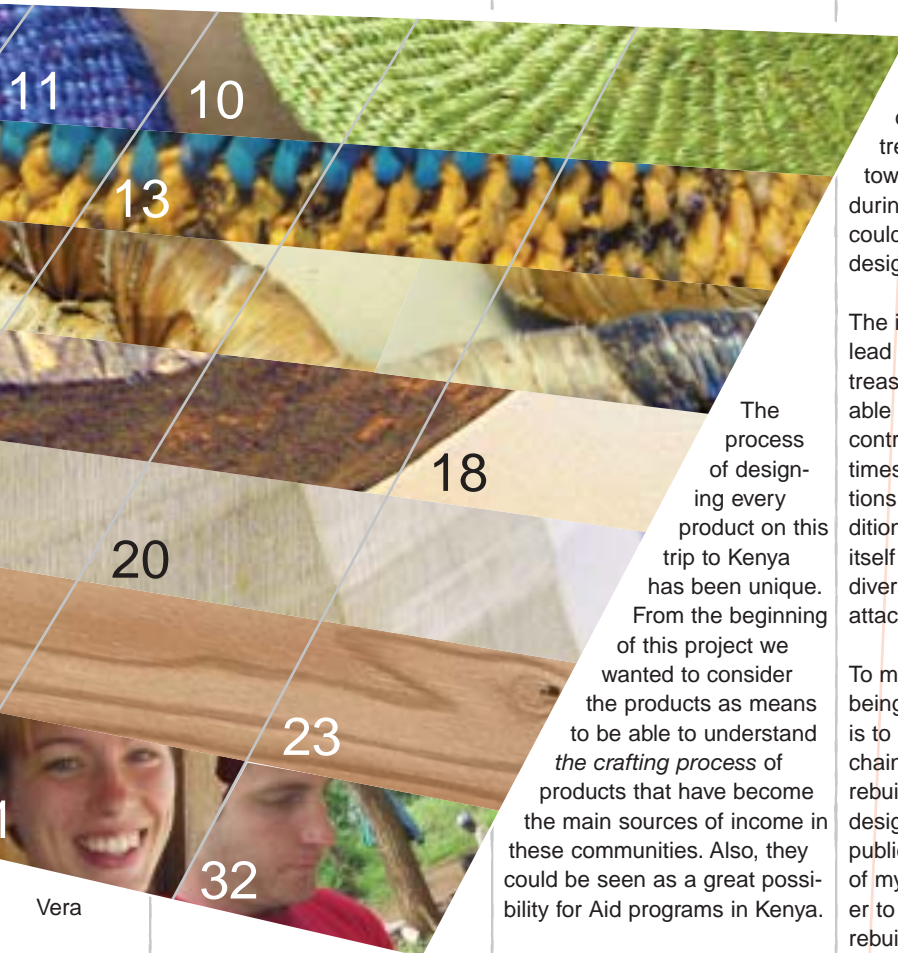
At this moment, humanitarian design is also becoming stronger; and taking on new directions. These new directions, spaces and locations could therefore also be depicted as a map, showing the journey and quest of a group of interna-

tional students with one common goal.

Maps depict time, space and culture and for us as a group, the first contact and means to visualise Kenya. Therefore, for this project, I decided to make a map too, in which we could describe and depict our own interpretations of this personal 'design journey in Kenya'.

The map is a good medium, to present to you, the first impressions on what a project like this is all about. Throughout this book, we would like to show our experiences, by stating our

interpretation of the connotation of maps. The first 'map' shows a personal interpretation of a *Topographical map* with landscapes and surroundings of Kenya. The second map we have named the *Relief map*, in which we will translate the materials and textures that inspired us in creating new products together with the local artisans. In the third and last map, the *Political map* you will read the personal process descriptions of each one of us, presenting the limits and borders of our journey.



Vera

Dimitris

Time in Kenya is not measured the same way as in Holland. Time in Kenya can be seen as *event based*. This journey was full of interesting moments and events, and as they were captured by us, we want to share them with you.

coffee) into *rare intangibles* (like traditions and rituals) representing our *values*. These earthly treasures usually fade away towards the western world, but during our journey to Kenya, we could retrieve them, from a designer-perspective.

The process of designing every product on this trip to Kenya has been unique. From the beginning of this project we wanted to consider the products as means to be able to understand *the crafting process* of products that have become the main sources of income in these communities. Also, they could be seen as a great possibility for Aid programs in Kenya.

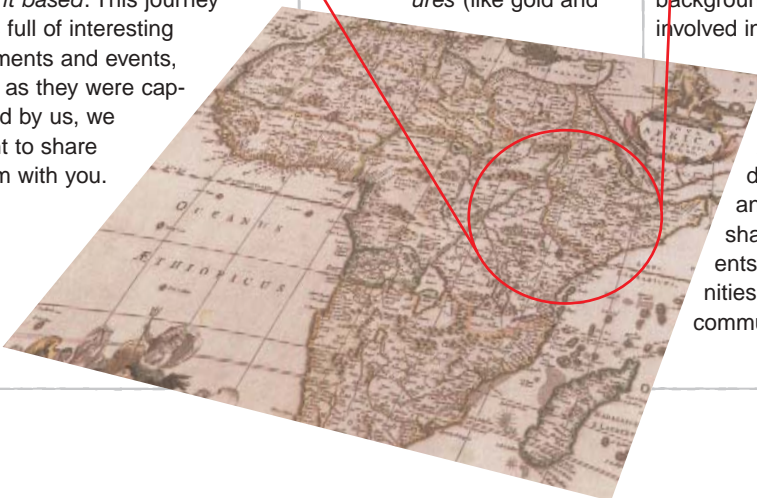
In the 16th and 17th century the content of maps depicted mostly power and treasures. Nowadays, the symbols have changed from *material treasures* (like gold and

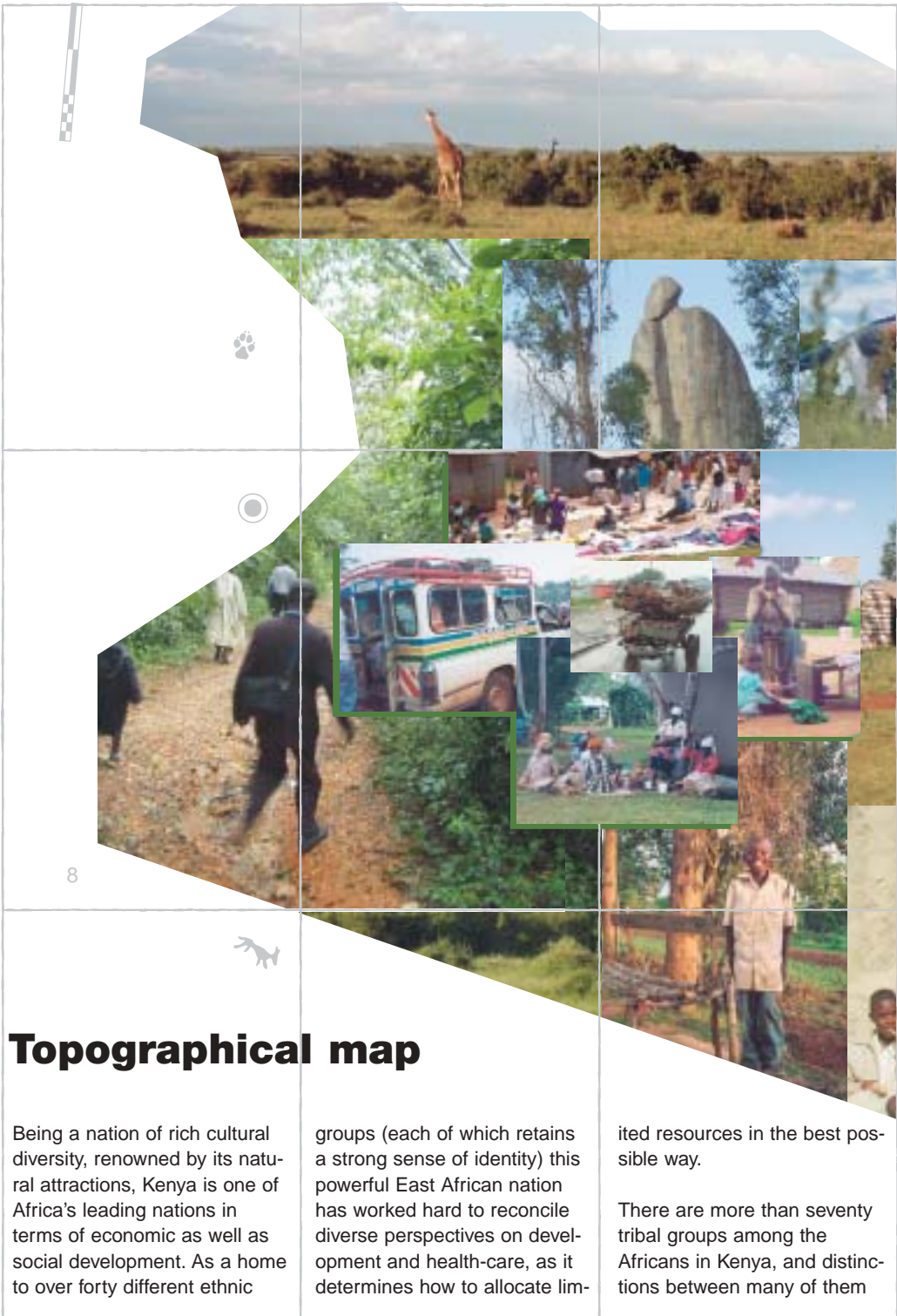
The intention of this book is to lead you to those rediscovered treasures. To us, the most valuable treasure of all is *Life*. The contradiction of these modern times lies in the fact, that locations where crafts and rich traditions are mostly alive, life in itself is in danger, due to a diverse selection of threats, attacking these countries today.

To me, an important part of being a humanitarian designer is to participate in 'breaking the chain' of mere *surviving* and to rebuild the chain of *living* with design as a starting point. The publication of this book is one of my contributions as a designer to this personal goal of rebuilding the chain.

I hope you will share my fascination and explore with us how we as a group of individuals from different countries and backgrounds have become involved in so many different ways with the same project.

A single group, with different perceptions, and ideas, hoping to share knowledge and talents to find new opportunities and solutions for a communal goal.





# Topographical map

Being a nation of rich cultural diversity, renowned by its natural attractions, Kenya is one of Africa's leading nations in terms of economic as well as social development. As a home to over forty different ethnic

groups (each of which retains a strong sense of identity) this powerful East African nation has worked hard to reconcile diverse perspectives on development and health-care, as it determines how to allocate lim-

ited resources in the best possible way.

There are more than seventy tribal groups among the Africans in Kenya, and distinctions between many of them



are blurred. Western (cultural) values are becoming more and more ingrained, while traditional values seem to be disintegrating rapidly.

Yet, even though the average African may appear to have drifted away from tribal traditions, tribe is still the most important part of the identity of many African people today.



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baskets in very simple geometric shapes. Therefore, on my first day, I brought some dried pumpkins, as an illustration for my aim to introduce more *organic shapes* into their sisal weaving process.

### My hosting-family

I was on my own, eight driving hours far from the rest of the group, and one hour walk away from the nearest telephone, *matau* (ways to escape), or mobile services. My 'new family' consisted of an eighteen year

While travelling through the different locations, the local shapes and colours of Kenya became more vivid in my mind. Especially when I visited the sisal weaving women group in Kyanganga, a drug-induced 'Lariam sleepless night' transformed pumpkins into bags and other new shapes in my mind.

### My project

I had seven days to work with the weaving-women to accomplish my mission. Up until that time, they had mainly produced



old young man, and his three young brothers. They were supposed to take care of me, while their parents were away working.

### My first day on the job

After a basin-shower with boiled rainwater (used to boil the breakfast eggs minutes before) I headed to my appointment with the women weaving-group, under the tree next to the Salvation Army church. Nine

o'clock, I came to understand, actually meant eleven, and by that time I was ready for my first sisal-weaving lesson. I asked five women to start with weaving a ten centimetre sample for a hot-pot mat, while other women were doing experiments for a new sort of back pack and newly to be woven jewellery boxes, inspired by the dried pumpkin I had brought with me.

Having five small samples of mats produced at the same time, proved to be a very effective way to develop the idea of the mats into a product, since the weaving women never tried to produce a product with a closed configuration before. It was a real design challenge to find the right way of introducing this new concept. We would experiment and try different methods, and after four hours of work, we came up with a pretty good sample!

### Time, policy making and negotiation

The whole Monday was dedicated to dyeing the sisal. It was quite complex, since I was not aware of the sisal dyeing politics myself. Only half way through the process I realised, that when a particular woman gave me a sisal-bunch to dye, it implied that she herself would also work on the product it would turn out to be used for...

During the process of dyeing, I had to define the final colours for the different products, and at the same time conduct a session of negotiations, keeping all the women involved happy and busy.



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# Sisal Jose Machado (Brasil)

Being received in such a warm way by the sisal- community (including a variety of different songs and prayers) I thought it to be my task to really think about the sincerity of these warm welcomes, their implications, and therefore, my responsibilities.

At a certain moment, the local schoolchildren, came to the window, piling all over each other, shaking their hands, while shouting 'how are you?'. It was in this environment that I spent my nine days in two weeks, working with the colourful sisal fibre and my new co-workers.

The inspiration for my Idea came to me by looking at the people carrying things on their heads. I imagined big, brightly coloured hats, to be sold in the international market. I worked on this idea to create a collection of hats, working in close collaboration with five different local artisans. In the beginning there were some problems to be solved. The working-material in the form of sisal did not always come to the workshop timely, and a daily shift of four to five working hours sometimes



just did not seem enough. But joining this new rhythm of life, I found a way to enjoy myself as much as possible, and the artisans (I'm sure) gave their best they could to us. Another idea I had, later in Europe, was to combine other materials with the sisal, like weaving a cover around rubber tires, to be used as floor cushions for example. And why not use sisal to produce armchairs or sofas? The outstanding qualities of sisal make it easy to build a whole new variety of structures.



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# 12 Sisal Ariel Beliz (Panama)



The braiding of the sisal strands is done on the thighs with a little saliva. The process is carried out at great speed, but is slow and monotonous in the long run. This also allows the weaver to do other things, while weaving like going to the field, to go out to get water, or carry a conversation. The same goes for the actual weaving of the sisal, where knots are created at equally high speed.

Sisal is plentiful in plant-form, but gathering the raw material



takes time, especially when large orders come in, which require the harvesting of many plants at once. All women are skilled in the traditional weaving technique, and some are able to utilise other techniques, such as crochet.

Tools used for the sisal process, are: a broad knife for peeling the sisal leaves, needles for sewing, and speciality items such as the crocheting needle. For colouring the sisal there is a broad variety of synthetic dyes available, although sometimes natural dyes are still used.

Sisal is a very temperamental material; it is not easily measured and defined. With these experiments I found out, that one can not be very precise with orthogonal objects. The traditional sisal-weaving technique is best used on medium- to large size objects, without any sharp corners. Seen from a positive perspective, the artisans were very open to our new ideas, after they were discussed. Also, the products executed were very close to the original designs on paper.

In deciding to create a sisal product on a bigger scale, I decided to take advantage of the crochet technique of weaving, for its more relaxed texture and relative time-saving quality. This proved to be a very good decision, since the curtain that developed this way is very free flowing as well as soft. This would be appreciated on a window where it can easily move with the wind.

The developed prototype in the end measured thirty by forty inches, with two-inch and four-inch vertical stripes of alternating colour. The next step was to develop colour-themes. I opted for two shades of green and a light purple, all very light and luminous. This product was conceived with local markets in mind, but I believe its' quality can certainly appeal to international markets as well.





# 14 Jua Kali Kythzia Barrera (Mexico)



able: a hammer, a chisel and a pair of hands.

I explained the project with a model, and before doing more calculations, co-worker Caleb already started to cut an oil drum! We got along very well. The material was not so strong, so it needed reinforcement. Caleb came up with a solution, while I decided to calculate the thickness of the material needed. Soon things started to come out in a natural flow, and by the second day we already had our first piece!

Due to our different languages, it was sometimes hard to communicate, also it took a while to try to maximise the use of the material. But in the end, the working-process And the end product remained about the same, leading to a universal end-product: A stool!

At this point, back in Eindhoven, I think I understand more about the new culture I encountered, and the several ways to make use of its advantages. In the end, I was able to put aside all disadvantages, and that is why

the process was so enjoyable.

The final collection communicates Much of Jua Kali's reality, its people, It's resources, it's technology, and it's skills etcetera. I was very lucky to find the perfect person to work with, and according to me, this project has proven to be a success, thanks to Caleb

The day of the exhibition of these new products was a complete celebration for all the people involved in the project. It turned out to become exactly what we wanted it to be, and more.

The products received feedback in the form of a successful evaluation, and also we thoroughly discussed the projects main issues, either in informal chats, or in the lectures given by especially invited lecturers.

We still have a long way to go with the marketing and the follow-up of the development of some of the ideas, but we definitely made a great start!



# Banana Leaf Ariel Beliz (Panama)

Banana-leaf weaving is a slow process. From the gathering of the material, to its processing, the actual weaving seems to flow easily, although the actual work is not so easy. One moment of loosening ones grip on the material, can cause a whole finished section to loose strength and fall apart.

This natural material is not originally very strong or long-lasting, and therefore the technique of bundle- coiling is the most efficient way of utilising it. The leaves must never be allowed to dry completely, as they would become too brittle to use. The humidity-adding process works by adding a generous amount of water to the gathered material, while keeping it in a closed bag (made out of woven plastic) to prevent its evaporation.

A table-mat was my first idea, combining a series of small discs of different diameters into an extended flat surface. Although the contrived product could be used as a doormat, the material is not *very* sturdy, and therefore I prefer for it to be

used on the table; as a decoration, or to place a series o hot plates on it.

The handbags evolved naturally from creating a basket that 'grows' vertically on one side only, while the other side continues to grow flat as a disc. This geometry as a result was very interesting to me, and became a starting point for other ideas.

I decided to attach a flat disc to the found shape, and the handbag- shape was born. Attaching a long handle was the finishing touch. I also decided to repeat this object on a larger scale, (about twice times the size of the original) This 'larger' purse was also very well received.



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# 16 Banana Leaf Jose Machado (Brasil)



The idea of footwear made out of banana leaf was inside my head, and I decided to make one sandal, to see how it would work.

This leather could also be used to As a medium for a written message, Like 'from Ebuyango-Kenya' for instance.



On the first model, I came to a problem with fixing a stripe on the shoes' sole, but I solved it, by weaving it in the same coil of the sole. In this way it became firm enough.



And so, I continued to Work, giving three more different designs to other artisans, and the result was very fruitful: three types of slippers made out of banana leaf.



Another problem I was faced with, was how to combat the humidity and roughness of the floor and their impact on the fragile banana leaf material. So, I decided to apply artificial leather on the sole, to make it more resistant, and therefore possible to walk outside the house.



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# Pottery Tamar Meshulam (Israel)

Starting my pottery-project, I soon realised I had only one potter (who did not speak English) to work with. . Also I noticed he was highly motivated to work with me, and my co-student Dimitris. We communicated via two translators Steven and Benbella, using clay modules for demonstration. The fact that *Machina* pottery consisted of a perfectly functioning team already, had a major effect on our working together.

Dimitris and I were living at the house of Felix – the head of the group, who gave us the freedom to consult our ideas with him, whenever we needed to. While following up with the artisans' projects, I was doing some clay work myself, as a preparation for the next stage.

The clay does enable you to have quick results, but as for the final product - it is totally dependant on the burning stage. Therefore, working with clay requires the ability to learn from experience. Having such a short period to work in the pottery forced me to make many try-outs, and simply 'hope for the best'.

**Baking pottery**  
The ladies 'cooking unit' is consists of the following components: the stove, the cooking pot and the serving pot. There is ring base to put the hot pot on and a wooden spoon to serve with. This is the traditional way of cooking, preferred by the locals. The stove shape is an evolved form of the fire with three stones (pot holders). The *Giko* is designed in the shape of an African lady with a fashionable hair style, holding a *Maasai-stick* (tribal weapon) to



resemble her importance as the housewife. The wife of Felix explained to us, that the food comes sweeter when prepared in these ceramic pots.



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# 18 Pottery Dimitris Konstantopoulos (Greece)

I had chosen to work with wood-carvers and pot-makers. Wood and clay: two basic materials which they have been using a lot in the African tradition, and throughout the history of human civilisation. These basic materials have been in use since thousands of years, and they will continue to be used in the future to come. . .

In the African tradition, wood and clay had several uses, like constructing houses with wooden structures and using clay to cover the walls with. But these materials today are still used as production material for regular, daily use items: headrests, walking sticks, chairs, pots, jugs. Also think of religious purposes: like masks, statues, or even jewellery. The most simple and easy to find material is clay. In the area where '*Machina Pottery*' is located, they collect sand and a type of black clay from a location very close to the workshop: the '*crying stone*', a holy area of the past. Another (brown coloured) clay is mixed with the black clay, and the sand, in order to combine their



assets. Also, the cost of this material is not high at all. The mixed clay is naturally black, and after it has been burned its colour changes to a very light sienna. The pot-makers usually dye the ceramics immediately after they take them out of the oven. Depending on the amount of natural bark-dye being used, a darker or lighter shiny black colour appears.

## The process

The pot-makers work with their hands, on a wheel which is made from car's tires, with a pivot between them. They can produce big sizes, depending on the shape and the timing of the burning-process. The pot-makers made an oven on the ground, using woods, putting the pots on it and then covered the whole thing with grass. At this moment they are building a new permanent oven, which will give more possibilities and better general conditions during burning-process.

## Creation of a vase

One artisan constructed a vase, and decorated it with clay-imprints of leaves. The second day of drying, the vase was cracked and broken. But when we arrived at the work-shop the

same morning, we saw (much to our surprise) two newly constructed vases, in the same shape, but smaller now produced on the wheel. I asked them to make one more vase without base and the pot-makers were willing to try this. This was the story of the '*bullet shape*' vases, which are very useful for storing oil, sugar, salt or wine. Also they are quite attractive, and could be used for decoration purposes only. The three pots which one can fit on top of each other, due to a



clay 'ring' at the base, which fits on the lid of the other pot. In this way they can save space in the small African kitchens. But of course these multi-purpose pots can also be used to prepare and store food in.





waiting for the driver to take us to Tabaka. He did not show up. The second day was a fruitful working day, having 2 non-English speaking carvers to work with. On the third day, I had one carver to work with. This new co-worker John was very devoted to the project, and could also speak English! At the last day the pot-makers finished the products, and I was given the promise that the remaining final items would be sent directly to the exhibition in Eindhoven. Some did.



I could not participate in the actual carvings, but was able to do the stage-sanding of the surfaces. During this work, I realised I had to change my designs according to the character of the craft and the craftsmen. There was a harsh atmosphere among the artisans themselves, which made it very difficult to co-operate with them. It seemed like they had no understanding whatsoever of our entire student-project. After having a serious and painful discussion with this group of artisans, some steps towards understanding and improvements were achieved.

Meanwhile, in the background there were several funerals and a terror attack at Mombasa.

### Spinning tops: playful ornaments

The experience of working with these artisans made me come to some important conclusions: I got proof of the fact that *design as a way of thinking*, could be used for some essential needs in our society. I also realised the importance of having a creative atmosphere within a working team, in a wish for a constructive change.

For me, it was a challenge to create the bridge between craft and design. In general it was nice having the opportunity to reflect my impressions in material, right on the spot when it actually happens. Another fulfilling experience was seeing the evolution of my ideas in the artisans' hands, as a form of reassurance for this whole project.

Soap potting is a technique which combines clay and soap-stone powder together, to create elegant, stone-like products.

### Communicating the meaning of the project

The first day was wasted on



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# 20 Soap Stone Vera Winthagen (Holland)

The plan was to keep everything as open as possible, to be open to new solutions. I asked myself what I, a Dutch quite *technical* educated girl, could add in Kenya. I decided that I could make a connection between the *technical west* and the *handcraft of the south*, by making a combination of techniques, to open new possibilities and 'upgrade' the Kenyan materials.

Still I realised that I should not expect too much, because my



ideas would all be quite new for the people involved. The strong points of the local technique had to be used of course, as opposed to 'imported' techniques, taken from a completely different context.

Being in Tabaka my old idea of a starting-point now seemed ridiculous, and even a bit patronising. The strength of the location and of the existing products was clearly made out by the unique way of decorating and carving. Anywhere in the world you could find soapstone, but nobody could decorate it the way the people in Tabaka do: a decoration with a very African

flavour. This flavour is what makes the soapstone so special, and this of course was what we had to use.

At that point I decided to start to make designs for jewellery. I chose jewellery, because after a few days I realised that transportation of large items was a big problem. A lot of problems would otherwise come up, because the packing of large items is difficult, damaging is always a risk, and transportation is expensive. The transportation rates go by weight, so the carvers would have to pay a lot of money to export their (heavy) products. If the orders are large the products can be shipped in a container, but since it is very difficult to make a lot of products at the same time, this usually does not occur. Most of the export-products are transported by (very expensive) aeroplane. I figured out, that it would be a great opportunity to make something light but relatively expensive to buy on an export market, so the carvers could earn more money with the same weight-rates, and less production mate-

rial. The second reason why I chose this plan, was that I wanted to use the leftovers. For me, it was shocking and almost unbelievable to see how much quantities of the valuable stone were just lying in the streets, not suitable for use by anyone.

Instead of going to the quarry every time (which takes a lot of time), it would be great if the carvers could just pick up the stones and work with them at the same moment.





mere *exercise*. We have people in Kenya who count on us, for them this production is a matter of surviving. We simply cannot 'play' with them. Therefore we owe it to them, to make this project into a success.

Designing in a different location in the world changed my designs in three ways. On the fundamental level of *motivation* (why am I doing this?), on the level of the *process* (having to work with the things that are there) and on the *output* level (what makes a shape look 'African'?). Because it was a non-stop event, the products are very much linked to my very personal experience. In a way the products are a reflection of this personal experience. During this trip, I encountered all my good points and all my bad points, and they will be revealed to you when you see the end-products. This project has been very intense for me. I hope the people I worked with, will get as much out of it as I did.

*The tiles project was done as a team with Kyhtzia Barrera.*

My attitude in the first week was a very careful one. We wanted to see what the village was like, and of course what the people were like. We wanted to be equal and fit in as much as possible, to better understand the lives they lived. I worked more on the decorations of the jewellery beads. I dyed the beads, and let someone make carvings on them, though there was only one man who could do that really well: the jewel man who was not there during our visit. This is why the decorations did not look very nice, and I decided (again) that I had to work with the things that were there, and not stick to an 'ideal' concept. I decided to stop with the decorations and I left the stone in the natural colour. I tried the same shapes also in different colours of stones (pink, grey and white). This looked much better.

After this, I combined the dyed leather with the designs I sketched, together with the soapstone beads. The result

was astonishing! Suddenly the stone radiated much more character and expression.

Being back in the Netherlands (just before Christmas) makes it very easy to say that this was an *exercise* for our selves and also for our school. But I realise very well that this is not the kind of project you can call 'just an exercise'. The things we have encountered, and the people we have met, were so real and so intense, that it would not do justice to label this project as a



# 22 Soap Stone Kyhtzia Barrera (Mexico)



that the work focuses too much on superficial shapes. I think that at that time in Kenya, I still didn't understand the culture, the peoples' behaviour, and their way of living. So the work we did there, back in Eindhoven feels a little bit forced, grinding against time and space. It was not really the best moment to travel to Tabaka, the 'elections time' was definitely influencing the atmosphere, and the stress within the four different groups was always present. Although I think I managed to make a

The ideas we had, we presented in a very abstract way. We didn't show drawings, and the people we worked with at first didn't understand very well what we were supposed to be doing there... Bad start! After that it took us one week and a lot of energy to fix that mistake in communication... Besides the facts that I had done previous research, and had been in Kenya one week already, I arrived to Tabaka not having a clear idea of what I wanted to do. Looking for inspiration within

the community (and also with a sharp intuition) I found some typical African forms and shapes in the clothing of the local people, which also spoke to me from the local architecture. The forms and shapes that appealed to me consisted mainly of *urn*-designs.

Urn design: a soul for the urn of a person's soul... Each urn has its' own personality, as each person (of a specific family) has its own uniqueness. Using the skills and the talented capability to conceive three dimensional forms of the local co-workers, we tried out some experiments. The local people work really, really fast, and I was still very confused, thinking too much of our cultural differences instead of the similarities our cultures shared. Guided just by my intuition, I wasn't sure what I was asking for. The *soapstone-round* for me, gave me a good shape to work with, because I have gained very valuable knowledge on how to approach these kind of projects. Looking back, I feel



good exercise, I still missed 'something'. From a design point of view, I think that I was too shy with decorations and texture, which both could have given the products of this project a stronger character. One of the reasons for this shyness was a lack of time. I wasn't able to 'think in decorations' while I was in Tabaka. After I left Tabaka, with a strange and mixed feeling of frustration and hope, it was too late...



# Woodcarving Dimitris Konstantopoulos (Greece)

Wamunyu is the heart of the wood-carving industry in Kenya. Woodcarving as a profession started in 1916, after the end of the second world war, by a man called Mutisya. On the way back to Kenya (after the war), Mutisya learned the woodcarving process in Tanzania and then he brought his skills to Wamunyu. Since those times the woodcarving industry flourished in this area. Most of the men are wood-carvers and the women sisal weavers: for them there is the Wamunyu Co-operative Society in collaboration with the Machakos District Co-operative Union.

Woodcarvers in Kenya have traditionally used specific tree-species in their work. These include Mahogany, Ebony, African Olive and Rosewood. Most of these woods are very rare, growing up slowly, and not allowed to be cut by law. As a result of this, the carvers are working to change the type of woods they use for their carvings. Today, they use faster growing woods, which they plant by themselves. These are Jacaranda, Grevillea and Neem.

The carvers separate the pieces from the trunks, by using saws and other simple tools. Their



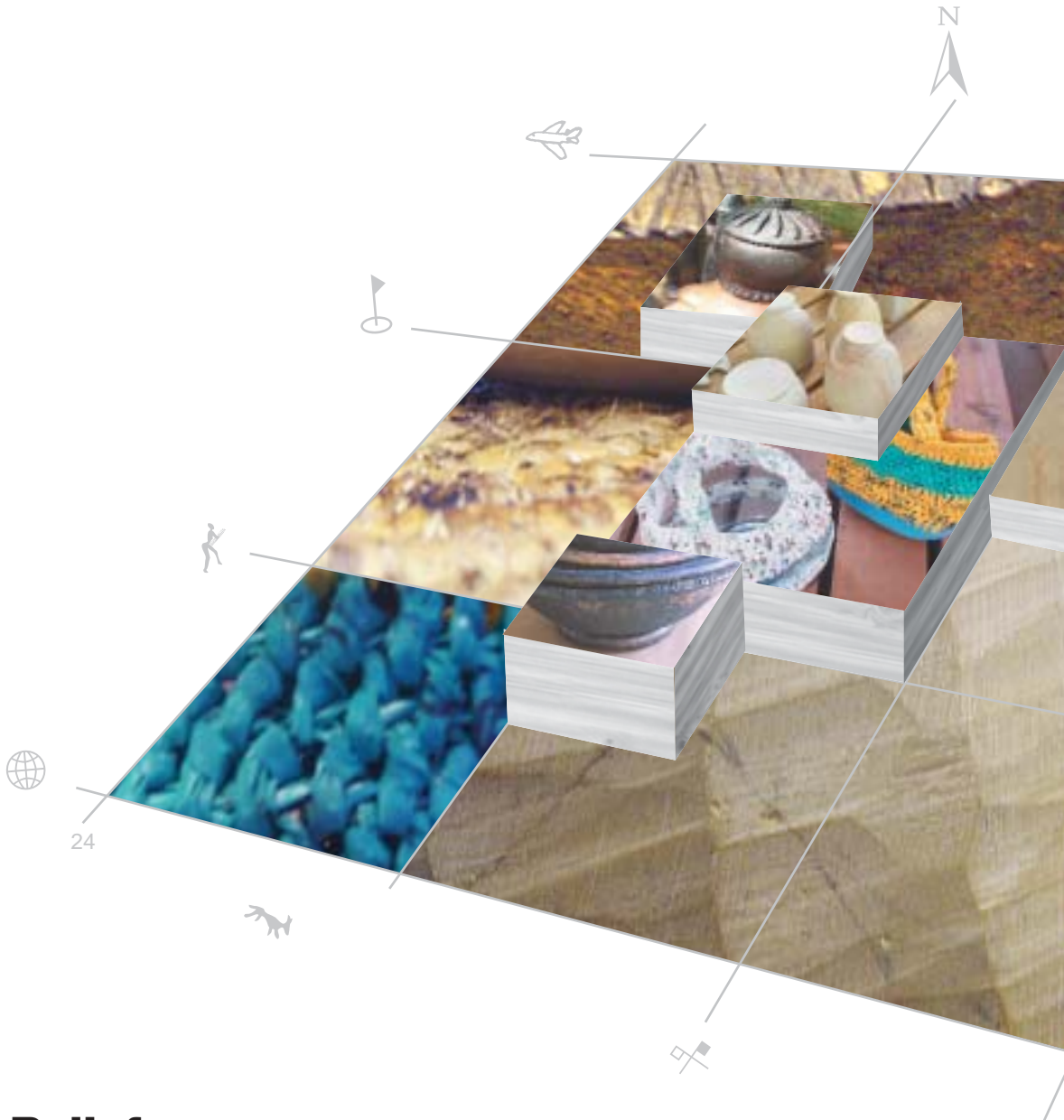
tools for carving consist off very sharp lath –hammers, and a special kind of *chis*, produced locally by an old blacksmith.

The carvers work very fast, using one hand for cutting the wood and the other to hold the piece that is being worked on. They even use their feet to hold or turn the woods while they are sitting on low seats (or on trunks). This way of working, looks very dangerous for somebody who hasn't seen something quite like it before. After they finish carving, the woodcarvers make use of files and sandpaper for smoothing out the surfaces of the product.

The end-products: an oval box and a children's chair, each were made out of one single piece of wood, and the carvers only took two days to get them finished! These products can be easy to sell in the local or international market because of their size and because of their practical shape too.

The leftovers are used for energy by burning. The carvers have constructed metal bars above the fire, in which products can be placed to dry. There is no opportunity to sell the leftovers to Machakos or to Nairobi's paper factories, because these are located very far away, and transportation-costs are high. Therefore, the use of waste-materials for energy are a perfect solution.





## Relief map

Maps can depict features that remain unchanged over long periods of time, like mountains for instance.

This map shows resources that were *transformed*. It is a map that identifies the period it is portraying, but foremost it portrays what is happening at this moment, and also the changes involved.



# 26 On Sustainability, Poverty and Health

## Ariel Beliz (Panama)

It just takes one glance to realise that Kenya's capital Nairobi behaves as any other struggling Metropolitan City. The usual images and infra-structures, while being definitely African, convey the same feeling and present the same (modern) problems found elsewhere in similar big cities world-wide: overcrowded highways, air-, water- and soil-pollution, and an overall feeling of stress...

Nairobi: the enormous gap between rich and poor, with thousands of people living on the street, many surviving only with the help of garbage and other people's good will. The outcasts, children and young adults, slowly wither away in the sad world of glue-sniffing, perhaps an easier alternative for having to face reality.

All these ingredients will have a great impact on a first time visitor. They add up to the truth of the urban monster that is Nairobi, which like many other big cities around the world, consists of an incongruent mass of loud noise, sweat and



dirt. All under the relentless heat of the tropical sun. This is what they call *progress*. Or at least, it may be the dream that keeps everybody going. On the other hand, everyday life in smaller towns and villages constitutes a very sharp contrast to this urban chaos. But as impressive as this stark contrast is, there is also an almost mathematical progression present, in which increasing degrees of poverty give way to a more difficult life. A life, at the same time a more simple and efficient, with a remarkably healthier lifestyle.

This "simple and healthier" life is a hidden blessing though, for anybody accustomed to (and hopelessly dependent on) the soft caress of comfort and technology. This simplicity (and any promise it may hold) can only be discovered after the thick wall of shock, personal conflict and disgust is torn

down. This vast obstacle must be overcome by, if one is to retain any degree of sanity.

Of course there is something to be said about hard physical labour. Waking up at sunrise and slowing down after sunset makes perfect sense, this cyclic way of living occurs everywhere in nature except in human life. So much for the blessings of electricity: we have become slaves to work and to the clock.

In short, the line between the so called 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', the line between *material* richness and *real life* richness becomes very blurry indeed. It's too bad that we have already hypnotised the Third World countries into wanting to become like us. And to foolishly try, like us, to find meaning in a life constructed by empty Calories, convenience and leisure...





## Tamar Meshulam (Israel)

There were many issues being raised during our stay in Kenya. I could easily focus on a specific subject, like 'the differences between craft and design'. But this would not feel right to me. Finally, my choice fell on presenting a broader view of this whole adventure, by choosing an open theme and image: 'black and white'. In this paper I would like to demonstrate the claim that the items we created are a literal translation of our points of view and perspectives. To emphasise this, I will use my impressions of Kenya, in comparison to African design language and -style. Thinking about Africa, I was playing with the image of black and white patterns. It became visual in an ebony tree-trunk, in zebra-stripes and in the Africans skin. Once I got to Kenya, the image expanded into a metaphor for our total experience, filled with new meanings. I could even notice it in the materials I chose to work with; the black mud and the white stones. It reflected on the way people think: their fatalistic approach to life, leaving no place for Neither interpretation nor doubts.

Eventually it was a conscious search for the linkage between the reality in Kenya. and the design-language of the local crafts I will start with some examples of those contrasts, or extremes if you like, experiencing the Kenyan society. Being a



foreigner among Africans, for me means being treated as the 'white colonialist' (some-one to get friendly with in order to get presents or sponsorship) and on the other hand as someone to share the so called *African love* with. Most members of the population there, live in precarious and rural conditions; fatal diseases, car accidents and risky jobs are very common. At the same time, the people we encountered in Kenya all seem to share a great sense of humour. When staying in Kenya for a while, you can easily differentiate the people into definite categories (black and white again): the *Pombe*- (strong African drink) drunks and the sobers, the well educated and the ignorant, the high (Western style) society and glue-addicted street children, the devoted volunteers, (who try to give aid to the weak), and the cropped ones, who take advantage of the latter. The Africans we encountered live in close harmony with nature, it some times felt like there were no limits between the two. For example, the clay they dig from the river, is used for pot-making and house-building. By all means, it is the ground you step on, ad



more. At the end of this cycle, it will all come down to earth itself. The soapstone powder is used to coat the houses, but also as a calcium integrator for pregnant women. Also, at the locations where we worked with the locals, there were no electrical devices in use, This seemed to give the work a kind of natural rhythm. Specific features of African design can be roughly described as having definite forms, defined borders, striking patterns, contrasting colours, complex compositions and irregular harmonies. They are often a representation of forms in nature. This of course is not so strange: most of the traditional pattern motifs of various tribes, had originally a symbolic or allegorical meaning. The craftsmen wished to record a pictorial statement of an idea. In the process of copying and styling, the pattern later evolved to a geometrical symbol.

*'In every symbol there is a record of history or experience' (Ethel Lewis)*

The record of our experience in Kenya was very diverse and not so easy to symbolise. We met with different classes and places; from the luxurious to the pathetic, from the amazing to the repulsive, and from the happy times to the more frightening. But the image that still flickers in my mind, is that huge and bright white toothed smile, on a black face of a very special five year-old African girl: Twaila.

# 28 Designing meanings

## Kythzia Barrera (Mexico)

Being a Mexican designer myself, this Kenya project was a crucial turning point for understanding the role of my work in the global context. I reconfirm the power of design as a holistic discipline, an activity that can move through different situations.

I will try to describe some of the differences in the way of thought between the Mexican and the African culture; differences which I knew to be very big, but not as significant as they turned out to be. In crafts, there is a constant game between usefulness and beauty, which has been named 'pleasure'. In Kenya, objects give pleasure because they are beautiful *and* useful at the same time.

Hand-made objects seem to satisfy a need as important as thirst or hunger. This is the need to recreate ourselves with the things that we see or touch, no matter how commonly used they are. In the Western society the relation with industrial objects is merely rational and functional. With a work of art, this relation is almost semi-religious, made for thoughtful contemplation...

Handcrafts preserve, metaphorically and physically, the fingerprints of their makers. These fingerprints are not the artist's signature, a well-known



name, or a trendy brand. They are a sign, a kind of scar perhaps, (and almost imperceptible) which celebrates the original brotherhood of mankind.

In Kenya, people feel through others. The body is *participation*, bodies looking for other bodies... Nature, people, work and crafts, share a physical life, which offers lessons in sociability...

These physical links are no less important than economic or religious ones. Objects as such, are in a constant, swinging movement between beauty, usefulness, pleasure and service. And this is exactly what makes any functional object a complete celebration!

The revival of crafts in our society may be a sign of good health. The modern society today, is now questioning its principles, as well as its promoted values, founded five centuries ago. Now we are looking for another path, another paradigm if you like. My wish is, that this search for another path is not too late!

The Kenya project taught me not to run against time, and not

to try to defeat it. I realised how my ideas got old and died in just one day, one hour, one second. There is a hidden truth in real time: the vitality of instant moments. . .

Unfortunately, we don't get this idea of time taught at school, and we don't know how to appreciate time. We are stubborn, and complicated, and as much as we would like to leave a trace through our *industrialised religion*, for industrial design there is no rebirth. Products disappear with the same speed in which they appear, leaving waste as the only evidence of their materiality. Crafted products don't want to prove anything to the world, they have no need to last forever and no hurry to reach death. They last, come to an end, and resign to 'not lasting'. Between the mummified eternal life in museums, and the thunder of industrial production, crafts exist as the human heartbeat. Crafts taught me how to come to an end, and, in that way, the Kenya Project taught me how to continue living: designing meanings.

### Jose Machado (Brazil)

*'My name is Jose, I came from Brazil and I'm doing a master course in Holland. I, together with other six students, came to Kenya to do a project which consisted of working in artisans-communities. The idea was to develop new designs, and to sell it in the international market.'* - 'Yes'

Purity. This is the most beautiful characteristic of Kenya and it's people. The way they move, the way they react, the way they look, the way they talk, the way they work, the way they live, all is pure. All the impressions of my journey in Kenya have to do with this simple and raw environment infused by many people living as basic as I could possibly imagine. Some of the most basic needs of my life, like running water, electric lights, a stove, a vase in the toilet... The people I met in Kenya have to miss all this. It called me to think about this *simplicity of living a life more attached to the earth* and it's people, in a very, very close 'one-to-each-other' way.

And why do the people in Kenya look much happier and healthier than we (the visiting students) do? Why is it they work for their 'day-by-day' and not for their far future? Why?!



It's because they live with more heat and passion for each single moment they are living.

This is a reflection of a common need of hope and pride, which tell them (in a rough way) not to spend money on a vase today, because one could die tomorrow. . .

And these necessities are translated to a life without our Western richness, but completely full of sensorial blasts, calling your attention, at every moment in time on every location where you might be.

Working in Jua Kali, Ebuyango and Kyanganga, I could recite three complete different experiences which taught me a lot of design processes and –concepts. From the dirtiness of Jua Kali to the poor banana leaf material of Ebuyango to the coloured sisal of the isolated Kyanganga. My mission was to put into force, all of the essence I understood as the juice of 'Kenya fruit', to every idea and project.

During every day of this long journey, I was confronted with situations and events that called my attention, in the form of signs or icons.

Sometimes, I found myself, for example, to be harsh or unpleasant to others. The Kenyan environment is violent more ways than one, and sometimes, I was bombed with events I didn't want to respond too directly. So, I had to close myself off, to better concentrate on achieving the right effects.

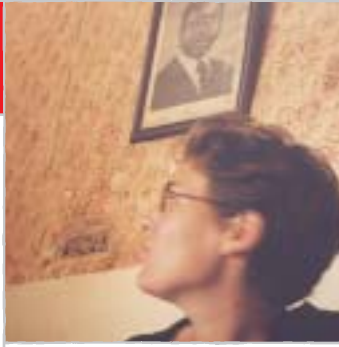
After the initial shock, my work went a lot easier, and I could practice my first experience as a 'Kenyan designer citizen', which I believe has been a successful attempt.

'Yes', Kenya for me was a lesson of how design can work deeply down to the real needs of life, and I have understood design as a process in which one must firstly achieve the essence of a necessity, and then, give meanings to this essence and finally shape it. And that is why Kenya for me, was a single experience in discovering the real meaning of design: purity.

# 30 (Side effects) a survivor's statement

## Adital Ela (Israel)

Adital Ela (Israel) While putting the process I went through in Kenya into words, I realised that the strongest thing about the project was the fact it was not possible to separate the design process from the everyday life. The two were woven so closely together, that they could only accumulate to the power of life itself. The process also made me realise, that truly meaningful design happens during the basic everyday life lived in the most fundamental way. Design can touch people, and bring them closer together, rather than further apart. Design is about collaborations and joined energies, it is about joined efforts, touching each other and working together, each individual putting in the best of efforts possible. There is something so basic about design that we have forgotten. It goes way beyond the endless quest of proving ourselves as the 'genius designer' creating the next clever thing. Design is not about the individual, it is about the group. It is about "making things better" in the deepest meaning of the words. Coming together as people and letting these interactions flow to new horizons, emerging surprises, revealing new possibilities, and new ways of action. Being in Jua Kali, I was confronted with so many simple and clever design-solutions, that in our Western design-world would have been considered extraordinary or



even revolutionary. Like sandals constructed from old tires, or oil lamps, made from old light-bulbs. These and other clever design solutions are found in Kenya daily, in the most natural and spontaneous way. This is the result of the basic need to continue life; the basic understanding that making the most of what you can find in your close environment, is the most sustainable way to survival. As designers we are taught to question objects, but I believe it is time we start questioning ourselves. Asking ourselves what it means to be a designer, to what purpose, and in which role? Design can no longer only be about questioning the object. It should be about questioning the action. Design is about: asking ourselves - with a critical view - towards which goals we are directing our creative energy.

It starts with opening up the definition of design, taking it back to it's basics before it narrowed down to egos and lemon-squeezers. It starts with breaking this 'old' meaning, and giving it a new life by exploring the possibilities, and revealing a new path. In Kenya we had a chance to see design in action, design which is, in every mean-

ing, integrated into life, using the same breath, because this design was about generating money for eating, drinking and having a roof to sleep under. It was about working with your two bare hands, and using the materials available in your surroundings. Working with what there is.

Every individual in rural Africa is a servant of life: the children of the house do not simply play, they sit around and wait until they are needed to fulfil other tasks which ensures life. A task to ensure that life will go on: Planting corn, peeling potatoes or collecting wood for a fire. Very active, these children are, and very much 'down to earth'... And us, the people of the West? We are active and always running, to chase time with our speeding cars, fast trains and microwave-ovens. But in order to save time for what? To be able to sit in front of the television, avoiding conversation with our spouses? Or to be able to visit luxurious hotels, to run away from life as far as we can, shutting ourselves from every truth that really touches? Here we are, surrounding ourselves with artificial environments that leave us numb. Doing is about finding the connection again: holding hands, starting from a small-scale collaboration and letting it grow... The project in Kenya was a first step, a beginning, a glimpse into possible ways of action. In the future, we all share the responsibility of finding the next step.

# Other Realities

## Vera Winthagen (Holland)

Does the environment you are surrounded with have an influence on what you do? If your environment changes, does that also imply your emotions change? Does your perception change? Does your approach to design change? Do your designs itself change? In short: *what happened to me in Kenya?* I will narrow this down to my first week, when I worked in the village Tabaka. This first week, I was very impressed with how the people of Tabaka lived, what they did, how they ate, and what they would be thinking of us. We saw a lot of different people, went to a lot of different locations. What made a big impression on me, was the fact that no single man took responsibility for his actions, leaving wives and children hopelessly behind. Everything we wanted to accomplish was very hard. We found out how hard life can be, what the meaning of 'mere survival' is. It seemed that these people in Tabaka were right. If the struggle of one day takes so much energy, how could you possibly concentrate on the future?

### What is the meaning of design?

Even for me it became very difficult to get things to move. All the ideas I had come up with got 'stuck' in my head. I could not get these ideas out, because I thought they had no



use anyway. I wondered if it was a result of the heat, the atmosphere in the village, or maybe it was just an African attitude towards life. It was very difficult to struggle against this negative feeling. Was it just a frame to look through to reality or was it really reality itself? Were the goals of this project perhaps set too high, and was it maybe better to just give up, donate my money and go back to Eindhoven? On Friday night we were invited to have dinner



at Salome's place. Salome is one of the leaders of the carver-groups, and also the only woman. The moment we walked into her house, my whole perception of reality changed. It was clear that Salome's family had a different perception of the world than me. Although the situation was the same, Salome and her family had made choices... You could feel that they wanted to

make something out of their lives, while on the other hand, there we – the students - were, people swept away by life. Maybe this attitude is a very Western way of perceiving the world, but this environment also gave me hope again. It is all about the reality you choose, and the way you perceive and interpret things. You can see this idea in the result of my designs; design exists because there is a situation you want to change. It is about action, and about movement. Design is an expression of hope; hope for an ideal situation that you can create by yourself. In this way, design reflects the Western way of thinking, because it implies that you can make (or change) your own reality. As a designer I found out, that even in a different reality there is a very aware choice to be made by yourself, and that I needed to make that choice. Is it wise to share this insight with the people in Tabaka? Would this conclusion be useful for them? The danger of sharing this insight could be, that we will impose our Western ways (again). On the other hand, I would like to give some people more hope, enabling them to improve their daily lives. Maybe, with a little more hope, they will not need us (any more); an *ideal* situation.



# 32 Who is learning from who?

## Dimitris Konstantopoulos (Greece)

During the project in Kenya we associated with different kinds of people, in different work-areas. Mainly we were living (and working) within the local communities of artisans and their families. We were living mainly on the countryside, in small villages without electricity nor special comforts, limited water resources and we were usually eating the most basic food only. We daily faced hard working men and women, most of them having to feed three, four or more children. People who had to deal with who knows how many other difficulties, day after day. These same people, who were also smiling, with lively movements and expressions. People whom always wish you well when they meet you, the same people who are always hospitable, helpful, and friendly. Happy people with difficult lives, who sometimes instantly burst out in a stream of rhythm, movement and songs... What is this secret power in the souls of these people, who - although facing a hard daily reality - still have it in them to sing, to dance and to laugh? Perhaps it is something deeply rooted in their souls and bodies? The need for survival, the struggle between life and death; the acceptance of the truth of 'existing for today', without any worries about what tomorrow will bring. Maybe it is this acceptance of reality that



gives their spirits and bodies flexibility, movement and rhythm... Kenya is a whirlpool, an eclectic mix of: history, culture, beauty, misery, the poor, the rich, dramatic events and happy times, colours, rhythms, dance and spirit. Kenya captures all these components in it's core, transforming them into something called the African Soul. Kenya is a country with many contrasts, but also a country with many similarities: savannahs and rainforests, dangerous and protective zones, peaceful times and wars... But all these qualities belong to one heart, one soul, a unity parallel to the bright sky above that very special country. Within these conditions in this "Kenyan core", a group of eight students ( at the same time shocked, happy, and surprised) travelled here, trying to understand, communicate, and work in a design process. For the creative process, it is necessary to have open eyes and an open heart, because all stimuli in Kenya speak directly to ones soul. Inspiration comes very easily, because the impact of the Kenyan reality is stronger than anything to be imagined. Many ideas for our project were invented On the spot in Kenya,

while others had been prepared in advance in The Netherlands. Also these pre-made concepts came to life and flourished by the hands of the local artists. When I was working with the woodcarvers, for instance, I saw many differences between the expression of the work made by several artists; this unique expression related of course to the personal talents and tastes of each creating individual. In this fact lies the beauty (and the unique quality) of handicrafts; compared to industrial products, every single handmade item radiates the unique personality of it's creator. All Kenyans know what it means to be make the little money last, they know how to save it, and have a talent to find inventive new resources. They also know how to recycle, to re-use and reconstruct using almost anything; from old car-tires, to empty cans and barrels. All combined tools, materials and proven techniques used by the Kenyans together, have turned out to be a great sustainability-lesson to us students from Eindhoven. Of course we need more time to fully comprehend the value and the results of our Kenya-project. But it is possible to draw at least one conclusion at this moment. Design can indeed be a valuable medium and tool for effective communication between different civilisations. Design as a creative collaboration, in bringing cultures closer together.

# The Follow Up



On one side design, on the other side craftsmanship: two worlds apart, only apparently detached by the Western history of “civilization”. Two groups of people: designers and artisans, definitely different by backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. As co-ordinator I had the challenging task to bridge these two worlds and prepare the common playground where a variety of exchanges could fertilize each other.

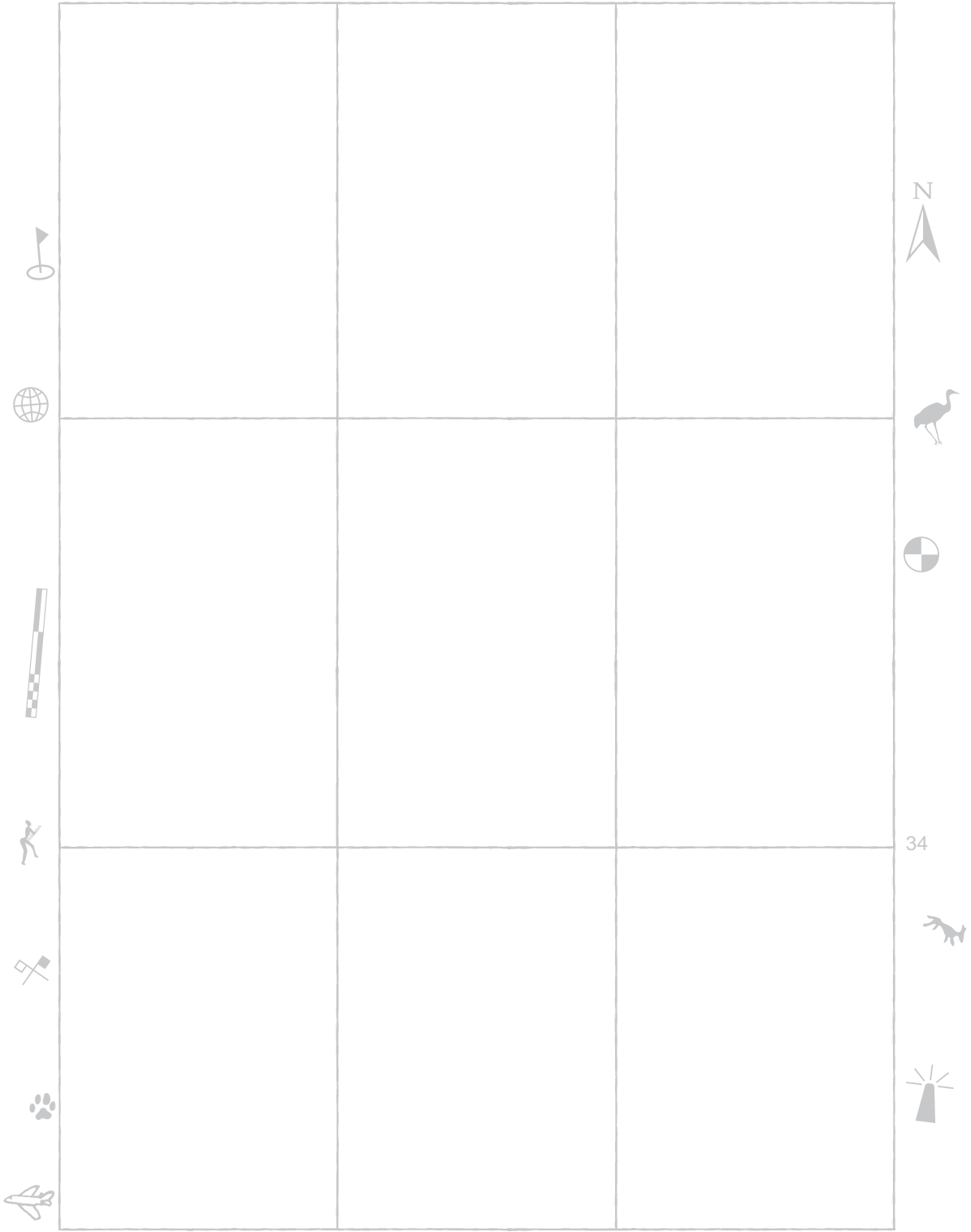
As similar as designing a map, I had been considering proportions, scale and measures while addressing the different perspectives from which both the designers and the artisans were looking at the project. I wanted to focus on a fair exchange, the scale of a reasonable intervention, and the measures for the creation of a common language.

As designer myself with an experience in working in non-western countries, I had the crucial role of a mediator. The meeting of these different groups had to consider and start from acknowledging the existing unbalance between diverse social status, economic conditions and cultural assumptions.

What happened on this open playground then? How did the players shape their new designs? Which were the compromises and the rules they fixed to play together? I believe that the products that were created in Kenya are now here standing for both an inter-cultural and an inter-personal narrative. It is in this expressive and relationship-building role that such products are at their best and could generate a meaningful innovation in the market.

The next step is now to recognize and work on the original value of the products for finding suitable marketing strategies able to express all their potentials. I consider these first achievements of the project part of a longer process: a slow process for meeting, sharing and creating together sustainable patterns for joyful and responsible production and consumption.

*Edoardo Perri  
Coordinator Kenya project for  
the Design Academy  
Eindhoven*



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## ENJOY THE DIFFERENCE

At this moment, humanitarian design is becoming stronger; and taking on new directions. These new directions, spaces and locations could therefore be depicted as a map, showing the journey and quest of a group of international students with one common goal.

Throughout this book, we would like to show our experiences, by stating our interpretation of the connotation of maps. The first 'map' shows a personal interpretation of a *Topographical map* with landscapes and surroundings of Kenya. The second map we have named the *Relief map*, in which we will translate the materials and textures that inspired us in creating new products together with the local artisans.

In the third and last map, the *Political map* you will read the personal process descriptions of each one of us, presenting the limits and borders of our journey.

Time in Kenya is not measured the same way as in Holland. Time in Kenya can be seen as *event based*. This journey was full of interesting moments and events, and as they were captured by us, we want to share them with you.

*Man and Humanity Masters (the 1st)*

Man and Humanity Masters  
Design Academy Eindhoven  
2004

