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Fogo Island: A Design Context

Introduction Annlina Koivu

On the evening of Friday, 14 October 2022, accompanied by OCAD's teaching staff, 16 students of the master product design course reached Fogo Island. Like many before us, we were glad to arrive after a long journey – in this case, one that had started in Lausanne the day before. Now, we had a week ahead of us, dedicated to exploration of and immersion in the local community and landscape. The group's tasks: to conceptualise ways to harvest the famed local winds in the form of green energy, without negatively impacting the island's raw natural beauty. Then, we would rethink the design of wind turbines. Context was crucial.

Annlina Koivu Why choose wind turbines as a project for MA students in product design? At first glance, it is not the most obvious choice.

Camille Alie Well, first of all we had the unique possibility of travelling to Fogo Island to work, paired with the opportunity to develop a research project within the sustainability realm and in collaboration with the school of engineering and management (HEIG-VD). So, the idea of working with wind energy felt like the most natural solution: it is a meaningful topic that is both highly contemporary and site specific.

Annlina At OCAD, it is important to stay realistic, and not embark on innovation for innovation's sake. In this sense, U.F.O.G.O. was a design-driven project from the very beginning.

Camille Wind turbines haven't really been addressed by product designers, probably because they are such highly technical objects. It makes you wonder what a designer could contribute.

Maxwell Ashford In fact, that was also the students' first reaction: "what can we really do?"

Camille We took the students out of their natural comfort zone, but once they understood the constraints that they needed to work within – things like structure, safety, transportation, set-up, maintenance, etc – great freedom for new ideas opened up.

Anthony Grace Obviously, none of the students worked on the highly engineered blades or the mechanical aspects of a turbine. They concentrated on the turbine's pole, the positioning, and integration of the turbines into a specific, physical context. Any project of such dimensions needs to be considered within the specific context.

Maxwell The week on Fogo was used to try to understand the context. They explored the island and its marvellous landscape and communities in order to pinpoint a specific location for their turbine. The type of wind turbine, its dimensions and necessary power-outlet were the results of these first decisions.

Anthony For example, a 900m turbine will provide energy for the entire 2,500 population of the island, whereas smaller turbines could be considered for more local, community-based use. This is a scale that is approachable and easy to work with for students. It also allows us to experiment with custom-made solutions. Finally, some results from the case study on Fogo could be applied elsewhere, too.

Annlina Wind turbines have generated quite a lot of polarised discussion. Those who see the benefits of this natural energy source are confronted with strong counterarguments that turbines have negative impacts on microclimates.

Camille Remember, design is a tool to change the perception of these giants. They should become acceptable – even appreciated. Think of other objects of similar dimensions and impact, like the Eiffel Tower or the statue of Liberty. They have great symbolic value and attract people, rather than repel them.

Annlina The project was developed in collaboration with engineers too. They presented the students with an introduction to wind turbines and then also accompanied them throughout their projects.

Camille Yes, during their introduction, for example, the students learned about the massive amount of concrete that is poured into the ground to support such large structures. Truckloads of concrete represent a serious issue, especially on an island that has a particular geological formation.

Annlina Fogo is one of a few places in the world where hundreds of millions of years of geologic history are exposed. The island's traditional houses had no foundations. Instead, they were wooden constructions, built on stilts. Such lightweight structures allowed entire buildings to be moved without leaving any footprint on the original site.

Camille The designers of the cliffhanger project used exactly this information to rethink the wind turbine's structure. They decided to replace the massive concrete base with a more lightweight structure that allows the turbine to "hang" between two cliffs.

Maxwell This originally felt rather utopian, but it was backed up by the engineers and structural experts who were consulted.

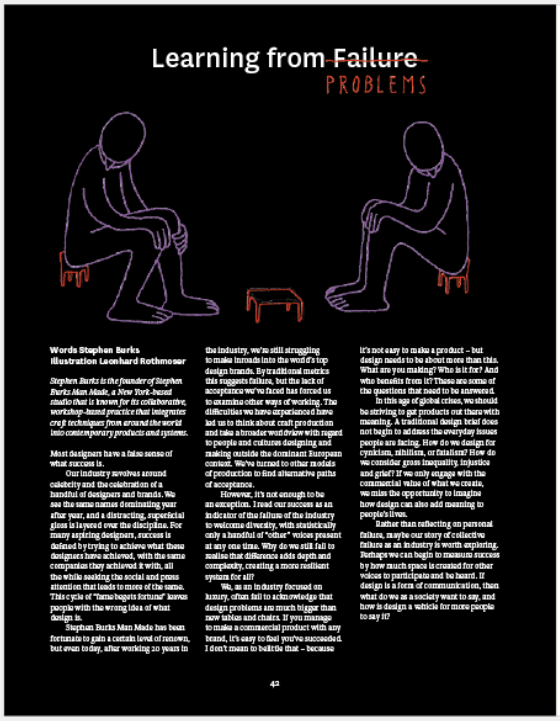
Annlina Others chose a specific, even symbolic, location for the turbine.

Anthony Fogo Rags are two wind turbines that form a kind of gate for people arriving by ferry to Fogo Island.

Camille Think of the work of Marcel Duchamp: placing a urinal in a public toilet means one thing, placing it in a museum has a completely different meaning. You don't always have to change people's perception through a change in design, but rather a change in context.

Annlina The designers of Rio found a way to integrate a wind turbine into its setting by almost letting it disappear. They applied a graphic pattern to the pole of the turbine, which offers a

U.F.O.G.O.



Words Stephen Burks
Illustration Leonhard Rothmoser

Stephen Burks is the founder of Stephen Burks Man Made, a New York–based studio that is known for its collaborative, workshop-based practice that integrates craft techniques from around the world into contemporary products and systems.

Most designers have a false sense of what success is.

Our industry revolves around celebrity and the celebration of a handful of designers and brands. We see the same names dominating year after year, and a distracting, superficial gloss is layered over the discipline. For many aspiring designers, success is defined by trying to achieve what these designers have achieved, with the same companies they achieved it with, all the while seeking the social and press attention that leads to more of the same. This cycle of "same bagels fortune" leaves people with the wrong idea of what design is.

Stephen Burks Man Made has been fortunate to gain a certain level of renown, but even today, after working 20 years in the industry, we're still struggling to make inroads into the world of "top design brands. By traditional metrics this suggests failure, but the lack of acceptance we've faced has forced us to examine other ways of working. The difficulties we have experienced have led us to think about craft production and take a broader worldview with regard to people and cultures designing and making outside the dominant European context. We've turned to other models of production to find alternative paths of acceptance.

However, it's not enough to be an exception. I read our success as an indicator of the failure of the industry to welcome diversity, with statistically only a handful of "other" voices present at any one time. Why do we still fail to realise that difference adds depth and complexity, creating a more resilient system for all?

We, as an industry focused on luxury, often fail to acknowledge that design problems are much bigger than new tables and chairs. If you manage to make a commercial product with any brand, it's easy to feel you've succeeded. I don't mean to belittle that – because it's not easy to make a product – but design needs to be about more than this. What are you making? Who is it for? And who benefits from it? These are some of the questions that need to be answered.

In this age of global crises, we should be striving to get products out there with meaning. A traditional design brief does not begin to address the everyday issues people are facing. How do we design for cynicism, nihilism, or fatalism? How do we consider grass inequality, injustice and grief? If we only engage with the commercial value of what we create, we miss the opportunity to imagine how design can also add meaning to people's lives.

Rather than reflecting on personal failure, maybe our story of collective failure as an industry is worth exploring. Perhaps we can begin to measure success by how much space is created for other voices to participate and be heard. If design is a form of communication, then what do we as a society want to say, and how is design a vehicle for more people to say it?

Terms of Address

Words George Kafka Photographs London Photo Project

What is an address? An address is a place. The location of your front door and the rooms behind it. Markers of addresses are visible on the surfaces of a city or town: signs declare the names of streets in graphic identities that distinguish between local authorities and local identities. Front doors frame the numbers they display as public declarations of fact. This is number 62; here is 16b; you are on Knatchbull Road. I'm fond of the crystallising moment when an address becomes a place – the result of a search on Google Maps, stepping off a bus or turning a corner to come face-to-face with, hopefully, the right location. Yes, this is the place: the Xi'an Impression restaurant or the Italian embassy or Jenny's new flat.

Large Stick by Alissa Christie (2018).

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