

Design for social responsibility in Brazil: methodological perspectives

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Abstract

The concept of Design for Social Responsibility (DSR) is strongly related to environmental, cultural, social and ethical orientations within the design process. These ideas are understood as a priority in order to create strategies for “achieving our needs without compromising the ability for future generations to achieve their own needs” according to the World Commission on Development and Environment. In this sense, the socially responsible designer came into scene as a mentor to help companies to achieve competitiveness and, at the same time, to attend some social demands (e.g. quality of life, respect for the environment). The role of design within this process is to contribute to perform business activities together with the development of society. In this way, some important alternatives to follow in search of a responsible performance within the production system are introduced, as follows: 1) transparent strategies; 2) internal market as a permanent goal; 3) respect for the environment; 4) attending consumers needs; 5) respect for community expectations; 6) respecting law, regulation, society and government principles; and 7) developing new methods of producing goods and services overall.

This paper is aimed to present the state of art of the concept of Social Responsibility (SR) in the Brazilian context. From the end of eighties, with the publication of The Brundtland Report, 1987, to our contemporary days, several events and ideas have contributed to introduce these concepts in our country, particularly in the academia and design centers. Besides, other methods from related disciplines have helped the designers, or a certain group of designers at least, to start a process of conscience when performing products and services and rethinking design education as a whole. However, it is still necessary to

strengthen the attitude of designers and decision makers in order to bring these concepts and scenarios into a practical level, particularly when performing public policies.

The main contribution of this paper is to present an evolutionary context from the concept of SR and its understanding from business point of view in Brazil as well as to discuss what it means to be a designer in a Third World country and its respective social responsibility. Also, the paper will focus on the role and importance of designers when planning the material world, facing problems regarding to the development of societies, particularly in economical, environmental, cultural and ethical perspectives.

Keywords

Design, Social Responsibility, Management

1. Introduction

Conversely to the premises of running business with the one propose of profits, commonly accepted worldwide as the single rule until the beginning of the 20th century, issues of ethics and social responsibility of stakeholders have come into scene associated to attitudes of philanthropy from companies, mostly focusing isolated actions in order to obtain strength in image and corporate recognition from society as a whole.

Philanthropy itself is not a bad attitude, but its only refers to some kind of donation and punctual responses to social problems in a very basic level of assistance. Helping communities to develop and achieve acceptable levels of sustainability is a much more specific and hard task. The concept of Social Responsibility is performed here as part of the running of business, particularly regarded to corporations' responsibility in attending demands of projects aimed in making profits together with respecting society expectations.

According to Arantes et al. (2003), corporate social responsibility can be seen as ethical attitudes in formulating business strategies that consider the impacts of the business itself taking into account society needs, both economically and socially, developing a network that facilitates the development in a broader approach.

Moreover, a socially responsible company is expected to continuously pay attention to its stakeholders' expectations, present and future ones, together with a permanent vision of sustainable society associated to every decision in performing business (ASHLEY, 2003). In this paper we define Social Responsibility as a set of commitments from an institution to society, expressed throughout acts and attitudes that positively affect the development of communities and social well being, assuming some moral obligations, beyond the ones imposed by law, even if these obligations are not directed related to its activities, contributing to the development of people and their quality of life.

This concept brings a need for an evolution in the way entrepreneurs run their activities, according to a set of social values that imposes new sets of internal

behaviors for companies to follow as reference of action in all business transactions. Besides, according to Logsdon and Yuthas (1997), the moral evolution of companies is strongly related to the moral development of their directors, the society within they are located, the environmental dynamic equilibrium, law and regulation, society expectations, together with the way strategies are formulated and conducted.

In this sense, Melo Neto and Froes (1999) propose that companies pay attention to internal markets, i.e. employees, as the same way to their target clients. Some positive actions in search for a better relationship between company and its internal market are, for instance, rewards, participation in profits and results of business, socialization of employees and investments in better conditions in workplace, self esteem and well being.

In all of these aspects, the participation of designers can be seen as essential to improve quality of actions, communicational aspects of relationships, enhance of performance in production process and the development of new technologies of management that contribute to implement a higher quality in business activities and life itself.

2. Design and Social Responsibility

Several authors have dedicated their attention to comment on management and its impacts in well-being, particularly the aspects of anthropocentric *versus* ecocentric management and decisions¹. The perspective of including design methodologies in both management models represents an important way in developing socially responsible business, once the designer has its main focus on the users` needs, which means thinking in well being firstly instead of developing profitable solutions that must be adapted in order to attend human needs or expectations.

The concept of Design for Social Responsibility (DSR) came into scene as guideline to companies to follow in order to achieve competitiveness and also attend to some social demands (e.g. quality of life, respect for the environment). According to The Ethos Institute (2000), in Brazil, the Social Responsibility is a way of performing business activities together with contributing to the development of society. This strongly means environmental, cultural, social and ethical orientations within the design process.

According to Manzini and Vezzoli (2002), designing in search for Sustainability is strongly related to the capacity of promoting production systems that can respond to some social and environmental requirements in their products using as less natural resources as possible, in comparison to the current patterns. In this sense, the designer is supposed to offer efficiency to the production process, focusing on reduction of materials, choosing the right and eco-friendly source of energy, optimizing and giving more lastingness capacity for products and especially designing disassemble facilities from the very beginning of the project. Besides designers must also consider the life

¹ See for instance the preliminary studies of Wood (1991), Logsdon and Yuthas (1997), Zadek (1998), Ashley (2003), among others.

cycle of matters and its impacts on human and natural systems, assuming that new behavior patterns are taking place over the market in a point that consumers demand producers with much more conformity with “environmentally sustainable, socially acceptable and culturally attractive ideas”.

The ecological approach in design has been understood as responsible attitudes of designers and decision makers, trying to minimize impacts and damages related to production plants. In this way, some methodologies have come into scene as guidelines, such as Green Design, Design for Environment, Design for Recycling, Design for Disassembling, etc.² Although these methods contribute to enhance environmental performances of companies, acting as vectors in search to sustainable practices, they do not dialog with communities and society expectations in an adequate way. Communicating with communities is much more specific than dealing with businessmen or decision makers. Here, we believe some aspects of design methods can strongly help to gather information.

In this perspective, based on the preliminary studies of Mendonça (2003), a responsible company has to plan and perform some essential dimensions of responsibility, as follows: 1) transparent strategies; 2) internal market as a permanent goal; 3) respect for the environment; 4) attending consumers needs; 5) respect for community expectations; and 6) respecting law, regulation, society and government principles.

Firstly, the perspective of transparent strategies reflects the company efforts in terms of a socially responsible planning. This means discussing the goals of business, evaluating the results of management and reporting clearly the company decisions, according to society expectations. Regarding to this phase, the designer can contribute to better communicate company decisions and strategies with all publics related to its business, creating manuals, displays and other kinds of communication means in order to achieve the adequate understanding of company values and practices.

Secondly, the employees, i.e. internal market, have to be seen as an essential part of the business itself. In this perspective, the well-being as a permanent goal is placed as integral part of company values. Here the designer can also develop communication channels in order to facilitate the relationship between directors, stakeholders and employees.

Thirdly, but not less important, the environmental impacts of production are increasingly dropped down and revised in order to achieve zero or as minimal as possible, requiring extra efforts from the design team. Ecological planning in design has its basis in this concept, when designers work in search of materials and production systems that adequate attend company and society needs when performing the production system itself.

² See for instance the studies of Papanek (1985), Graedel and Allenby (1995), Allenby (1999), Manzini and Vezzoli (2002).

The fourth aspect of a socially responsible company is regarded as the consumer needs which, of course, plays an important role within the manufacturing system, focused on innovation and offering high quality of services and products.

Another point of a socially responsible strategy is given to the relationship between company and community, evaluating the impacts of these actions on the quality of lives and cultural values overall. Finally, the respect for law and regulation as well as society principles have to be integrated to the management system itself. Here the methodology of design can help in the gathering of information and communication with community values and cultural needs. This is seen as the most important and innovative aspect to follow in order to develop socially responsible and acceptable design solutions and alternatives.

In this sense, the company must plan its goals respecting the interests of profits and at the same time listening to and understanding the society needs. Within the global scenario, and particularly in Brazilian contexts, facing the social characteristic of Brazil, the market has been pushed to attend some popular demands more efficiently (e.g. housing furniture, alternative transportation, low cost products). In this perspective, the design works as sensitive radar in order to offer adequate methods of responding the society needs.

These ideas are understood as a priority in order to create strategies for “achieving our needs without compromising the ability for future generations to achieve their own needs” according to the World Commission on Development and Environment.

In this sense, the socially responsible designer came into scene as a mentor to companies achieving competitiveness and, at the same time, attending to some social demands (e.g. quality of life, respect for the environment).

However, focusing on the role and importance of designers when planning the material world, facing problems regarding to the development of societies, particularly in economical, environmental, cultural and ethical perspectives, it is still necessary to strengthen the attitude of designers and decision makers in order to bring these concepts and scenarios into a practical level, particularly when performing public policies.

3. Brazilian scenario

Several authors consider the beginning of socially responsible corporate attitudes in Brazil in 1960, when the Association for Christian Managers (ADCE) was established (TOLDO, 2002). This organization considered socially responsible acts from managers and businessmen as an obligation from religious doctrines, controlling their attitudes as an extension of religion itself. Only in the 80's awards of ecological and social behavior from companies were introduced as a way of recognizing positive attitudes and good corporate practices, particularly the Eco Award of Citizenship, created and promoted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Sao Paulo.

Also important as a mark of consciousness in Brazilian scenario, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Human Development, Eco 92, held in Rio de Janeiro, can be seen as a decisive event in search for new patterns of production and social behavior from companies as a whole. Right after the conference, for instance, the National Campaign Against Hungry and Misery in Brazil, started in 1993 by Herbert de Souza, a Brazilian sociologist, constituted a very important attitude in regard to spreading the idea of social responsibility among companies and society together. Moreover, in 1997, the same sociologist started a model of Social Report (i.e. *Balanço Social*), which is aimed to be published yearly from Brazilian companies publicizing their actions in favor of society and environment as well as the impacts of their production.

The Social Report was further developed by the Ethos Institute, established in 1998, a non-profit institution aimed in offering consulting in corporate social responsibility³. The Ethos Institute adopted the method of Social Report as dashboard to companies to follow in order to obtain recognition from consumers, partners and society itself as well as enhance their practices according to social responsible attitudes.

The search for international certification of production standards such as ISO normalization 14.000 and SA 8000 (Social Accountability) have also helped the companies to further look for social and environmental issues that improve the production itself.

Besides, there are some other important facts that have contributed to enhance Brazilian companies' consciousness in the way they conduct their businesses and decisions, migrating from isolated philanthropy to a social responsible management. Firstly, we can consider the great need of social equity in whole Brazil, particularly in North and Northeast regions. Secondly we can refer these changes regarded to an increasing level of organization of society, especially in the Third Sector, e.g. NGOs and socially oriented institutions. Thirdly, we can refer to an increase in competitiveness in business activities, when image represents a lot in favor of marketing. And finally we can refer to a higher level of publicity and communication of social actions on mass media, which implies an enhancement in society expectations.

4. Final considerations

Despite the fact that design is an interdisciplinary profession that interacts with many other activities, designers have not yet learned how to better communicate their skills and potential ideas in order to facilitate the solutions from other fields of studies. In this sense, we must urgently act in a way that other professionals can understand our work and cooperate with us when developing solutions effectively relevant from society perspective. In this sense, an "agenda for social design"⁴ is still to be introduced among design communities, both academically and professionally, moving from isolated discourses to a much more practical level of design implementation.

³ See website <<http://www.ethos.org.br>>.

⁴ See the work of MARGOLIN, Victor. A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research. In *Design Issues*, v. 18, n. 4, Autumn 2002.

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Paulo Souza was born in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. He is Doctoral Student in Design and Architecture by University of Sao Paulo (USP) and Master of Science in Sustainable Development by University of Brasilia (UnB), both in Brazil. Got his bachelor's degree in Graphic Design at the University of the State of Bahia (UNEB), specializing subsequently in Eco-oriented Product Development and Design, in Germany, where he also had a training period as product designer at The Hessen Design Center (DZH). Today, he is design consultant and professor for Projects Methodology, Production and Graphic Analyses and Product Ergonomics at UNEB. In the academic field, he is editor of the Brazilian Journal *Design em Foco*; develops researches on Design and Social Responsibility as part of the Doctorate Program at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of Sao Paulo – USP.

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