

ABSTRACT

Oax-i-fornia is an interdisciplinary academic project that, since 2005, has brought design and art students together with artisans in Oaxaca, Mexico. The project's goal has been to create a transnational collaborative space fuelled by the notion of play as a generative force, allowing the collaborators to produce meaningful cross-cultural connections not commonly associated with brief encounters between visitors and locals. The project has been based upon the concept that craft, and tradition itself, are in constant evolution through historical interventions called "generative intersections", and that tourism also functions as an important experience within studio-abroad programs. The outcomes of the project have been measured by the quality of the shared experience, and the ways in which that experience has changed notions of difference among the participants, rather than solely through the objects resulting from the collaborations. Today, Oax-i-fornia proposes a model for transnational design education in which the collaborators' culture and language differences become not obstacles but rather catalysts for the creative process. These differences push participants to forge common ground through the act and language of "making to-gether," a physical and emotional process that bridges differences and awakens a kindred spirit shared by all makers.

Key Words: play, craft, design, Oaxaca

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FULL PAPER

Imagining Oax-i-fornia

In the summer of 2005, my partner and co-teacher Michael Sledge and I embarked on an adventure that would drastically change the course of our lives. We had settled on spending three months in the city of Oaxaca in southern Mexico, where I had proposed a multidisciplinary summer design studio through the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco. We rented our house, packed up the car, and, accompanied by our dog Walter, took off for a momentous drive from California to Oaxaca.

I believed that Oaxaca would be a perfect site for this endeavour because of its strong craft production. The course was planned to be a simple creative exchange between artists, designers and artisans, where knowledge could be shared within a beautiful setting. I originally imagined the experience as a compact experiment in making that might yield interesting objects as a result. I also hoped that the course would, in some way, continue the ideals of my own design practice, having spent

15 years considering design as a tool for social impact and cultural interaction.

At the time, I did not foresee the complexity held within this seemingly simple proposition. Personally, the project created a new path for my own understanding of transnational collaborations and their connection to tourism, design education, and locality. Yet I did not imagine that the project would become a model for collaborative projects in Mexico and abroad, which it did, as indicated by Oax-i-fornia's inclusion in the upcoming show at the Museum of Art and Design in New York, *New Territories: Design, Craft and Art from Latin America, 2000-2013*. Nor did I imagine that it would forge strong local partnerships that would improve the livelihoods of over 45 artisan families throughout the state, as it also did.

This paper introduces Oax-i-fornia as a collaborative project that, today, is based upon almost nine years of hands-on experience, a theoretical framework that takes advantage of the creative opportunities implicit in travel, and a keen observation of the ways in which collaboration can create a hybrid space for interaction, especially within a culturally complex place such as the state of Oaxaca.

I have now conducted the Oax-i-fornia project almost every summer since 2005, and the project is currently expanding to include a number of different academic Institutions. It has become my operating principle to constantly revise and reinvent the program based upon recent experiences, defining a dynamic approach to both teaching and to the design of the course strategy. Looking back on field notes, results, and most importantly, the feedback from participants, I added new exercises, lectures and procedures while altering or discarding old ones to help me understand the best way to design an encouraging, respectful, and enjoyable creative environment. Through my later studies within a MA in Design Program at the University of California Berkeley, I also brought theories pertaining to cultural anthropology, popular education, tourism studies and design into the course. One important result was my understanding of the ways in which a studio abroad program became connected to everyday tourism, and my realization that this connection can be a fruitful lens for understanding the significance of the academic experience for students and teachers working within a transnational setting.

The notion of traveling, especially to foreign places, can be tightly bound to the traveller's creative impulse. The ethnologist Orvar Löfgren has pointed out that the tourist feels a profound need to document his or her travel experiences, in response to a social pressure that demands the creation of personal interpretations of the places visited and the documentation of an experience that becomes "one's own" (Löfgren, 1999). Yet Löfgren adds that this experience must be framed within a unique and personal perspective that cannot be acquired through premade documents such as postcards, travel albums or travel books. What seems to be prized and rewarded most, according to Löfgren, is not the experience of travel itself, but rather the personal, custom-made interpretation of the travel experience, which in turn operates as a social marker of the taste and individual identity of the maker. Viewed from

this perspective, traveling becomes an opportunity for creative output, its frame limited only by the abilities of the traveller to meditate his or her experience through those technologies of representation that are within reach, and in concert with his or her own past experiences, professional background, and life history.

This creative aspect of travel is a potentially attractive one for the professor of any studio-abroad program within art and design education, as it presents a ready-made opportunity to channel the students' more familiar creative output into a unique learning experience. It is important for me to distinguish between a study-abroad program, within which the student sees and experiences the difference of foreign-ness and culture, and a studio-abroad program, within which the student actively and creatively contributes to the local culture. Each of these options presents, in their design, very different ways of structuring interaction within the destination, and provides unique points of entry for students to engage both their own knowledge and that offered by the host country. From this perspective, it becomes impossible to disassociate the tourist from the art and design student; the student's academic training constantly encourages critical thinking and the search for meaning in one's surroundings, as well as the critical expression of one's personal views of life and, in this case in particular, difference.

For me, the studio abroad program becomes the favoured alternative, as it becomes an opportunity to shift the students' creative energy away from individual and personal expressions and to redirect it toward the Oax-i-fornia model, a collaborative and transnational learning experience that benefits both the foreign hosts and the students who visit them.

Guiding concepts for Oax-i-fornia

Two other operating frameworks, working in unison, have also guided the conceptual premise for the development of Oax-i-fornia—the dynamic character of tradition and the effects of what I call “generative intersections”. First is the idea that, within the world of material production, traditional forms of making are neither static nor fixed propositions, but hold at their core the notion of change. Tradition, when viewed from this perspective, becomes adaptable and evolutionary because it must keep pace with new and ever-changing contexts. In an attempt to insure the survival of their tradition, a given society adapts or abandons its techniques to match the needs, likes and dislikes of new generations (Shils,1981).

It is this openness to change that creates fertile ground for a society's active engagement with the second theory, one that I call “generative intersections.” These intersections are historical moments in which conditions become optimal for changes to take place in traditional forms of making. One instance of such an intersection was that created soon after the Conquest of Mexico through the Spanish commercial routes between Asia and Europe. Every year, starting in 1565, the ship known as “La Nao de China,” or the Manila galleon, would arrive from Asia in the port of Acapulco. The arrival of this ship, loaded with 1,100 ton cargo of the richest, most sophisticated Asian goods, radically changed the panorama of material culture in Mexico. Before being transported

overland to the Atlantic coast, and from there to Cadiz or Seville, the luxury objects and textiles were shown in a two-month fair held in Acapulco. Here, artisans and makers from all over Mexico encountered for the first time a multitude of exquisite objects of Asian tradition and manufacture, and could even meet with the makers themselves who on occasion travelled the route (Almazin, 1971).

This contact turned out to be greatly generative, as it forever influenced Mexican material culture, including craft, food and dress. Japanese lacquer technique was adopted and ingeniously applied to the ornamentation of gourds, transforming them from utilitarian vessels into objects of luxury. Likewise, the “rebozo”—the quintessentially Mexican scarf worn today by many indigenous women—is actually thought to be a hybrid of the Spanish Manton de Manila, the Indian sari, and the sun cloth worn by Mexica women at the time of Cortez’s arrival in the Aztec capitol Tenochtitlan. In this way, traditions changed through a point of intersection, giving way to hybrid or novel objects that embodied a new moment in time. Oax-i-fornia seeks to harness a similar creative encounter between two cultures and approaches to making in order to encourage new hybridities of form. Oax-i-fornia also seeks a more egalitarian distribution of creative power, moving beyond appropriation of artisanal technique and forming an actual collaboration between artisan and student.

Oax-i-fornia is firmly grounded in a concept of the hybrid as a space of creative force, a dynamic and lively domain in which differences and oppositions can be negotiated—even if not resolved—through the making of something new. The anthropologist Nestor Garcia Canclini envisions the formation of the hybrid as a deeply creative act, a form of making that is able to entertain a multiplicity of origins within a single suspended space by creating new connections between them. For Garcia Canclini, fusion is the placid melding of disparate traits, whereas hybridization implies a dynamic of inclusion and rejection, an active struggle between entities that culminates in the emergence of a new and powerful identity (Garcia Canclini, 1995:XXV).

In the context of Oax-i-fornia, this hybridization takes place through both the participants’ creative process and the objects that they produce. The members of each group of participants integrate their potentially conflicting realities—that of the visitor/student and the local/artisan—into a collaborative space with the common goal of creating something new, a culturally synthetic partnership. The disparities between the two groups become apparent as visual tensions within the objects that they create, with the objects oscillating between the two groups’ different ways of understanding making, design, and by extension, the interaction itself.

As an example, the motivation of an artisan to exploit natural resources for his own survival and that of his craft becomes a crusade for ecology and conservation for that artisan’s working partner, as their collaboration engenders strategies that stem from personal principles, but harmoniously coexist to create a unified solution. This became evident in the wooden “asemblijes”, a set of puzzle-like toys (Figure 1) for which the participants re-utilized broken pieces and discarded bits of the wood from traditional carvings. The trees that produced this wood are now endangered, and the recycling solution therefore highlighted

conservation as well as showcased the ingenuity and creativity of the traditional artisan carver. In another example, a silk cocoon family of necklaces (Figure 2), the tension between the aesthetic merits of decoration versus the modernist appeal of minimalism found a balance in the creation of natural or referential forms within a frame of abstract structures.

Figure 1: Asemblajes



Figure 2: Silk cocoon necklace



For a successful, integrated collaboration to take place it is essential that there be a common link and mutual interest between the participants. This has made Oaxaca an ideal place to locate the studio because of the many artisans who live and work there. For the purposes of this project, the English term “craft” refers to what the locals call *trabajo artesanal*: those utilitarian objects that have been and continue to be produced by hand locally, using local materials, and following traditional techniques that hold strong historical and social links to the communities that produce them. The governing notion here is that of the “handmade,” a way of producing objects that—regardless of their

aesthetic accomplishments—are charged with deep emotive qualities for both makers and re-ceivers because they make evident the history that informs the process of their creation. Oaxaca, known as the state with the greatest bio-diversity in the country and one of the greatest in the world, also has an extensive ethnic diversity, resulting in a very lively, varied and strong production of high-quality hand-made objects.

Figure 3: Oaxaca's history and diversity



Oaxaca becomes fertile ground for creating transnational dialogues centered around the production of new forms that could fit well within the contemporary global marketplace. Viewed from this perspective, the Oax-i-fornia creative exchange is certainly not unique, as it is one of many collaborative academic or professional efforts taking place around the world today that support transnational relationships as part

of a production process. One example, the Los Angeles-based design company Artecnic's Design with Conscience collection, brings together well-known designers and artisans to produce contemporary objects for international sale (Artecnic, 2013). Another group, Aid to Artisans, a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, supports many similar projects that result in great returns for the organization and its makers (Aid to Artisans, 2013). These interventions, like many others, are taking place in the developing world, where a perceived need has risen for the use of design as a vehicle to reinvigorate craft. Yet there is a compelling difference between Oax-i-fornia and many of these projects. It is a program goal to create an egalitarian experience in which all of the collaborators share benefits, though at times these benefits may differ. Also, the production of an object is not the ultimate goal in this collaboration but rather a memory of the experience itself. Our project does not set up a strict designer-producer relationship in which the designers "design" and the artisans "make," with contact mediated through messengers and intermediaries, because such a process brings about an unequal distribution of power and knowledge. Instead, Oax-i-fornia seeks to establish a shared space of interaction that provides practical and theoretical knowledge to all participants, who, with goals established collaboratively, can actively determine the rate and nature of their own learning.

The studio

Oax-i-fornia brings together between twelve and sixteen students from a partner school in the United States, two local art students, and five local artisan families each year. The students range in discipline and can come from graduate or under-graduate programs. Each student must submit a portfolio in advance and go through an interview and selection process. We select new artisans each year, who we interview and provide with an orientation before the final selection takes place. The artisans are compensated for their time, and they are given ownership of the pieces that emerge as a result, provided that they also give credit to the students who collaborated with them. The administration and support team includes myself as the project director and head instructor; Michael Sledge, a writer who oversees a creative writing workshop; an anthropologist; and a facilities support staff. Each member of this team is fully bilingual and participates in all aspects of the process as needed.

Figure 4: Ex Hacienda de Guadalupe, the project site

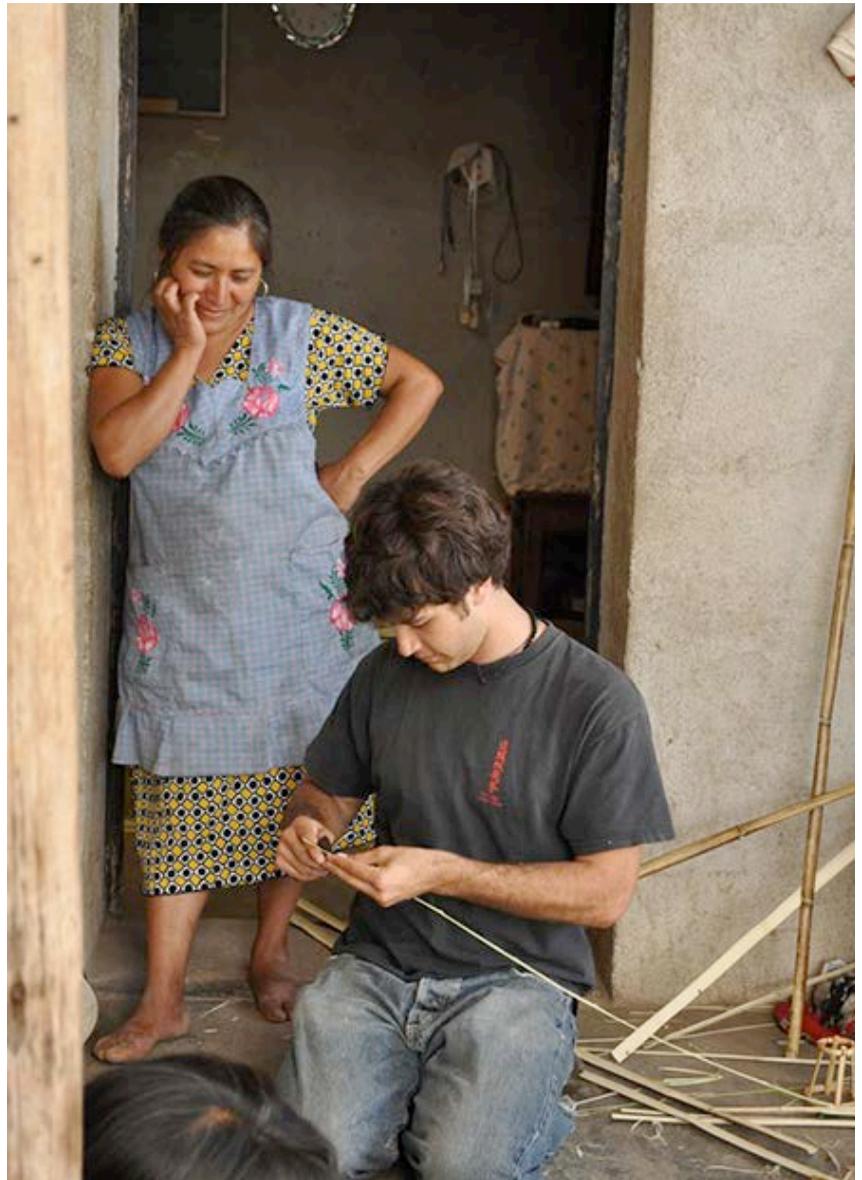


Regarding the global food problem, Foster (1992) and subsequently Leathers and Foster (2009) focus their attention on under-nutrition in the third world. However, the problem with global food today has another side: excess consumption – in particular the high calorie, low nutrition junk food made increasingly accessible – because it leads to obesity and related health problems. As the United States Department of Health and Human Services notes, obesity is linked to a multitude of health problems including diabetes, cancer, and heart disease (2013); and, according to WHO, there are more than 1 billion overweight adults globally and at least 300 million of them are obese (2003). The global food problem now includes both over-consumption among the wealthy, as well as lack of access to good nutrition among the poor.

Phase 1: Immersion + documentation

The Oax-i-fornia project lasts three weeks and includes three distinct phases. The first phase, lasting about a week, brings the students into close contact with the host culture and provides them with an opportunity to acquire basic visual, cultural and historical knowledge of the city and its surroundings. During this phase, all of the project's participants are introduced to one another by sharing examples of their visual work and by telling personal stories, which helps to make the members' cultural similarities and differences explicit as a first step towards collaboration. This phase also includes guided tours, field trips, and opportunities for socializing with fellow travellers and local artists outside the program, ending with each student experiencing a three-day immersion in their collaborating artisan's village, where they share in the day-to-day experience of family life. At this point, the artisans receive reinforcement in their role as "masters" as they begin to teach their processes to the students within a mentor-apprentice environment.

Figure 5: Apprentice to artisan working with cane



Phase 2: Experimentation

The second phase, which also lasts about a week, is centred on an experimen-tal workshop that introduces the premise of “play” as a generative practice. In this workshop, the artisans and students work together to explore materials and novel forms of making within a supervised academic context. This phase helps to create a level of professional connection that complements the personal encounter of the immersion experience. An introductory lecture on play, the “playful” and the “creative hand,” provides background and grounding for the workshop. The participants then begin to manipulate a variety of found materials, in unexpected ways, with the intent of moving beyond their entrenched ways of working while creating a common ground for the exploration of innovative forms and techniques.

Figure 6: Play as a generative practice



Figure 7: Experimenting with back-strap loom



Figure 8: Collaboration between artisans and students



Phase 3: Production and exhibition

In the third and final phase, each group of collaborators works to bring the results of their experimen-tation into finished objects, a process that engages students, artisans and even extended members of the artisans’ families. At the end of this phase, we schedule an exhibition of the project’s results with a local museum, one that often provides both the artisans and students with their first exhibition in a major public venue.



Figure 9: Some of the objects produced in the workshop (photos: Emily Jan)

Figure 10: The end-of-class show at Biblioteca Henestrosa in Oaxaca (photo: Emily Jan)



Throughout the project's three-week duration, the visiting and local students are asked to reflect upon their project experience through creative writing and the creation of additional site-specific and site-generated work. These concluding projects often become powerful expressions of individual experience that not only reflect each student's talent and interests, but also serve as complex and sophisticated accounts of the student's encounter with difference, otherness, and the self.

Figure 11: Portrait of accordion player on location, (photo: Tomo Saito)



Figure 12: Personal project by student Raphael Noz



Modulating the transnational dialogue

Oax-i-fornia's aim has been to carefully nurture a new kind of transnational "generative intersection," one that allows tradition to evolve and remain relevant in the contemporary world. I have found that it is difficult to identify measurable outcomes from Oax-i-fornia that can serve as indices for the success of other, likeminded endeavours. What I can offer is that others can examine both the external (that is, tangible) and the internal (that is, personal) results of their projects in an attempt to understand the key forces that might generate their own results and that might make them replicable in similar situations within different geographies.

What can be measured is the program's economic impact. Each year more than 70 of the Oax-i-fornia projects become produced as prototypes, and approximately 40% of these prototypes go into production and become available for sale within various commercial venues throughout Mexico and abroad, creating tangible economic benefits for the artisans. That said, the objects themselves cannot reflect the depth of an interaction that enables participants to collapse perceived differences into kinship. In my opinion, the primary outcomes for Oax-i-fornia are the internal ones: the deeply personal experiences that melt away fears, assumptions and prejudices for both the students and the artisans. As described by Rie Hirai, a student originally from Japan who enrolled in the California College of Art's MFA program:

The bond that I share with this family was created by this working relationship. And now that I think about the beginning of the two weeks of working, I realized that the family was just as scared as I was. I think we grew together. I also figured out who I want to be and what is important in my life.... I want to use my creativity to bring people together and help bridge gaps that are created by language, culture and class. I see that under all of these cultural labels there [are] people who are just like me. These skills I can take anywhere I go. These are skills that I didn't realize I had. I had been afraid of working like this or challenging my self in this way, but when I did I realized how capable I am, how capable we all are. ... I will never forget.

It is this possibility for discovery and change on both sides that a properly structured transnational collaboration can provide, which is difficult in three weeks within a classroom situation. For the artisans, Oax-i-fornia provides them with an opportunity to think independently and to realize that they can reinvent their work and continue to do so as time passes. Recently, two of our younger artisan graduates were bestowed the Fondo Nacional de Apoyo para las Empresas en Solidaridad National Award (FONAES) for young artisan entrepreneurs—an important distinction personally awarded by the president of Mexico—for projects that emerged from the Oax-i-fornia collaboration and that they have continued to refine and expand, opening new doors and opportunities for themselves and their families.

Figure 13: Garcia family, huarache makers, receiving the Oax-i-foenia diploma



Figure 14: Alexander Juarez, winner of the FONAES award

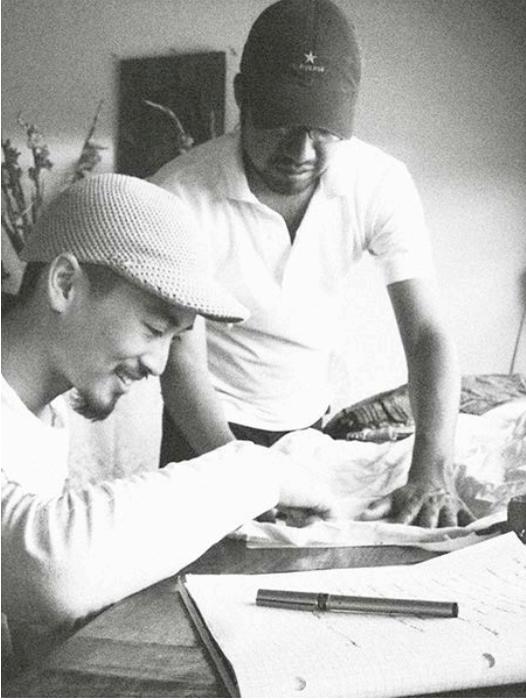


Figure 15: Button and buttonhole scarf for which Alexander won the FONAES award



The most important effect that our project can have, in my opinion, is the creation of a connection between participants that leads to their personal growth as individuals and that propels a change in the way they look at the world and their own opportunities within it. Such an experience cannot simply be taught, but must be experienced within a well-structured academic framework that allows for three key elements to occur. To begin, the project must allow for a constant cycling through the host/guest relationship that shifts the positions of control throughout the process. The Oax-i-fornia visitors receive the opportunity to act as apprentices living with the artisan families, but then the relation is flipped, and the students in turn host the artisans within their “home”; in this case, the hacienda where the final making takes place. Next, the project should permit all participants to share a common ground with the intention to set aside some of the differences between participants while encouraging others. In Oax-i-fornia, this occurs mostly through the collaborations, within which class, language and cultural differences become secondary to the challenge of creating something new together within an unfamiliar relationship. The course lectures have the same effect and intention as the collaborations, as they introduce information that is new to most participants, creating a shared visual/theoretical language that is beyond the expertise of any individual. Finally, the project should introduce a centralizing component that will create cohesion between the group members. In the case of Oax-i-fornia, “play” has been used as a tool for connection, as it introduces a definitive break from the participants’ traditional ways of working. The emphasis on play with random materials frees the makers, especially the artisans, from cultural and political notions of tradition while providing a supportive space for experimentation. The ambiguity of play, when directed into a creative exercise, can create a healthy level of apprehension for all participants, who must surrender to a shared uncertainty that comes to unify the group. Play is also used as a form of dialogue that prepares both artisans and students for the reality of working together: it allows for roles to be newly defined, for expectations to be made explicit, and for power structures to be redefined, and for the participants to experience a deeper sense of trust (Lieberman, 1977).

In conclusion, I propose Oax-i-fornia as a model for design education in transnational contexts, showing that the confluence of craft, art and design, when engaged through a serious collaborative process of “making” between culturally diverse individuals, can serve not only as a powerful generative force for innovation, but more importantly, can create deep and meaningful cross-cultural connections not commonly associated with brief encounters. In this context, culture and language differences should not be seen as obstacles to be overcome, but rather as catalysts for the creative process because they push participants to forge common ground through the act and language of “making-together”, a physical and emotional process that bridges differences and awakens a kindred spirit shared by makers everywhere.

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Roul Cabra

Professor
California College of the Arts (CCA), 421
14th Street, San Francisco, California,
USA, 94103
E: raul@cabradiseno.com



About the author

Raul Cabra is Senior Adjunct Professor at the California College of the Arts, where he has been teaching about design and its intersection with social issues at graduate and undergraduate levels for the past twenty years. He is also principal of Cabra Diseno, a multi-disciplinary design firm based in San Francisco with an emphasis on community-based and socially engaged work in the fields of health, art, and education. Raul lectures frequently on his work for national and international audiences, most recently addressing the University of Nuevo Leon Design Conference in Monterey, Mexico. He has also served as a consultant to the Republic of China on social change through education and sustainability and is currently the director of the sustainable tourism redevelopment project for the Mezcal Route in the Valley of Tlacolula in Oaxaca. Raul holds a MA in Design, Anthropology and Education from University of California Berkeley; and a BFA in Design from California College of the Arts in San Francisco.