

Project Ultima

(Community Fabrication)

Integrative Project Thesis

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2014 - 2015

Last summer (2014) I found myself in Zanzibar working for a small NGO after completing a study abroad program on mainland Tanzania. Soon after arriving on the island I began to notice beautiful gates and other bits of metal work that were scattered throughout the city (Images 1- 3). Since I had worked in metal before, these gates fascinated me and I asked the man I was staying with if he knew anything about their history. He said he did not, but he did have a friend, Msellem, who was a metal worker on the other side of town (IMAGE 4). I spent the next month observing Msellem work in his shop and on different job sites around the island. I was in awe of the resourceful and creative methods that Msellem used to create consistent shapes and patterns with minimal tooling, such as bending steel rods around pipes to create consistently sized circles (IMAGE 5-6). As I continued studying Msellem's work and developing our relationship I imagined creating similarly designed gates in Detroit, where there is a market for such security measures, but this interest didn't last long. To merely create something that exists somewhere else could not effectively communicate the larger impression that the experience had on me. If my project was to communicate something that I had experienced in a foreign culture then I needed to identify what the root of this impact was. After a while, I realized what really inspired me was this opportunity to take an up close look at a making culture - a culture where hand making is still a necessity

as opposed to a novelty- and how these ideals differed from the consumer driven realities in my own country.

When I returned to the US, two thoughts stuck in my head. The first was the idea of acceptable aesthetic, which to me essentially comes down to mass produced vs. handmade items. Most the things we see everyday are perfect. Passed along by mechanical limbs. Created alongside millions of other objects just like it in matter of hours. Identical to each of those. Free of flaws. Free of hints. Free of character. Many of the objects I saw in Zanzibar had imperfections, yet were still perfectly functional. Patterns on gates added beauty, yet angles varied and welds that had occurred as the craftsman hands had not yet warmed up on the day of creation, disrupted visual continuity. While this is not necessarily a preference rather an indication of access to goods, I think its still an important truth to notice. The second idea had to do with how oversaturated our Western World is with things. I would argue that the average Western person encounters more things in their life than any other person throughout history. Yet, I would simultaneously argue that this same person is less aware of where these things came from than ever before. This disconnect has been a contributing factor to many of the environmental and social issues of our time. This is evident as levels of consumerism continuously

increase and national job satisfaction is at its lowest point in two decades (Adams).

I was raised in a suburban neighborhood in the USA, the epicenter of modern consumer culture. A place where commodities are bought and sold without a moment's thought to where they came from, who or what made them, or what their environmental and social impact may be. Environmentally, this is obviously a concern and we have already seen the detrimental effects this capitalist driven consumerism has had on the planet, but what really interests me is the effect this hands-off-consumptive culture has on people. From food to furniture Western consumers have a lack of interest or knowledge about where their goods come from. A time existed not so long ago when the maker had control over pace and quality of production. While this occurrence has been largely lost in typical US employment, it is still the reality throughout parts of the world. Conversely, observed historian Robert Judson Clark, industrialized societies have created a division of labor that, "deprived the worker of the pleasures of guiding his product from conception to completion; machines had replaced the traditional standards of beauty with those of economy and profit (Clark)." This lack of knowledge and interest not only deprives laborers of having pride in their craft and creating goods/services for a limited local market, but also further deprives people of an ability to

appreciate quality and local treasures as anything more than a trinket or souvenir.

Is Maxwell coffee the best coffee? Who determined our taste for it and decided it would be the standard? Who decided that Americans should be drinking coffee, which is sourced from plants far from our borders, anyways? No matter where you go in the United States you can find the same goods: avocados in New Hampshire, Ikea furniture in California, French wine in West Virginia. From coast to coast the shelves are the same: the same items, the same homogenous brands. Commodities, and they are treated as such being bought, briefly used, disposed of, and cheaply replaced. In a home catalog from the late 1800's a single average coffee cup could cost about \$80 in today's money. Is it logical to think that this decrease in relative value has not contributed to the vast piles of waste in our landfills and inability for craftsman to make a living? The same goes for larger items, items once considered heirlooms. Possessions to be passed down from generation to generation are now discarded at a frightening rate because of cheap material choices and overly trendy design. Many contemporary designers value universal solutions that are easily globalized, easily marketable, sleek, trendy, plastic solutions to all of the world's problems. Why do objects look so similar throughout so much of the industrialized world?

Much like athletes, rock stars, CEOs, and actors in our society, which chose to praise individualism over community long ago, designers and artists are seen as superior, working in isolation with wisdom and vision that far exceeds the capabilities of average people. "By the modernist movement . . . the artists stood at the pinnacle of status, too, a cultural aristocrat" remarked writer, William Deresiewicz (Deresiewicz). But what if the designer was not a solitary figure, not considered a rare genius working away from the masses, but a part of the community that they served. What if instead of trying to create the perfect product that could be sold around the world, their ambition was to try and create the perfect solution for a specific problem, in a specific place, at a specific time? What if they neither worked alone nor took credit for working alone, but worked very closely with those involved in the problem they sought to collaboratively resolve?

Throughout the first semester of the IP project I created a number of different functional works from metal and wood, always attempting to use the most minimal processes possible and working on improving my craft. These included the jib table I was taught to make to create shapes, a window gate similar to those in Zanzibar, and table frames with decorative patterning (created with the jib table) (Images 7 - 11). Yet I strived to make the project bigger than myself and to work with a community. The Art School here at

Michigan has a pre-existing relationship with a high school, DCH, in the Brightmoor neighborhood of Detroit, Detroit Community High School. The high school's founding ideology was based on the Montessori hands on learning methodology, but as standardized test scores fell the school had to adapt into a more common curriculum. This shifting of curriculum resulted in pseudo employment opportunities for students where they are paid from a grant to work on a variety of projects. These projects include a bike maintenance workshop, where students learn how bikes function by working on one of the over 160 industrial tricycles donated from the old Ford factory. There is also a screen-printing workshop which allows students to create their own designs on T-shirts and a wood sign carving workshop where students make signs for local clients (both private and commercial). I asked the founder of DCH, Bart Eddy, if he would be interested in adding a basic metal fabrication class as a complement to the other programs and he responded with enthusiasm.

From the beginning my goal was to spread the low tooling methods of fabrication I learned in Zanzibar in order to demystify making and encourage meaningful, engaged creation. Since mid January, I have spent every Saturday morning from 8am - 2pm working with a few different students (Images 12-14). We have started by learning the very basics of low tooling metal fabrication: designing, cutting, shaping, welding, grinding and finishing. As the students

have begun to develop their skills with the medium, the project has evolved from a purely skill based workshop to industrial tricycle modifications, with the goal of creating delivery trikes that deliver donated groceries to low-income seniors in the Brightmoor community. This idea was created collaboratively with Bart Eddy and synchronizes DCH's multifaceted creative efforts to serve a community need. The addition of the metal workshop acts as a string that ties the other programs together; programs that exist at the same time in the same place, but until this point were missing any meaningful conversation. The bike team will strip the bikes and refurbish them mechanically, the new fabrication team will modify the trike by adding enlarged, hand made carrying containers to the rear, the wood team will add the decking to the new containers, and the screen printing team will put logos on the side of the containers. This project allows the participating students to not only learn a skill, but it also gives them agency to work on designs collaboratively and to see their designs come to life in the real world.

There are many designers and studios that are, like me, rethinking the role of the designer as well as the sustained impact of the design. Studio H has gained notoriety in recent years by creating beautiful pieces of architecture that are hand built by the community the structures exist in (Image 15). This sort of practice increases community agency and pride in a project as well as

encourages us to get back to our roots of making. An idea similar to those of the Arts and Crafts movement, which believed that people needed to create and further needed to take pride in what, they created. I also draw inspiration from aspects of the Wabi Sabi Ideology: a Japanese philosophy which actually appreciates an objects imperfections, individuality and modesty (Koren). Our aesthetic landscape is sterile and lacks character, but why? What makes a simple design of handmade 45 and 90 degree angles less valuable than a 3d printed unachievable and unapproachable form? These ideas are the ones that have inspired the first iteration of our tricycles, which are completely reproducible with nothing more than a hacksaw, a stick welder, an angle grinder, and the jib table.

I would not be so naïve as to claim that the developments of the past centuries have been all negative. Of course we have benefitted from much of what has happened in the past 100 years. Communication is easier than it has ever been, medicine is better and generally more accessible, food is generally available. But in our modern mentality of upgrade and replace is there perhaps a time to say enough is enough? That just because we have the capability of creating 1,000,000 plastic toothbrushes an hour, or importing coffee from Kenya, or buying a new car every 5 years that it is not actually necessary? For our planet, for our culture or for our souls? That to think

creatively, locally, sparingly, and resourcefully could actually benefit us all.

Our work is not done, and I plan on continuing collaboration with the Brightmoor community this summer. I am looking forward to further developing Project Ultima (Images 16–20) into an archetype of community fabrication and design that could be reproduced elsewhere across our uninspired landscape.

Images 1 - 3

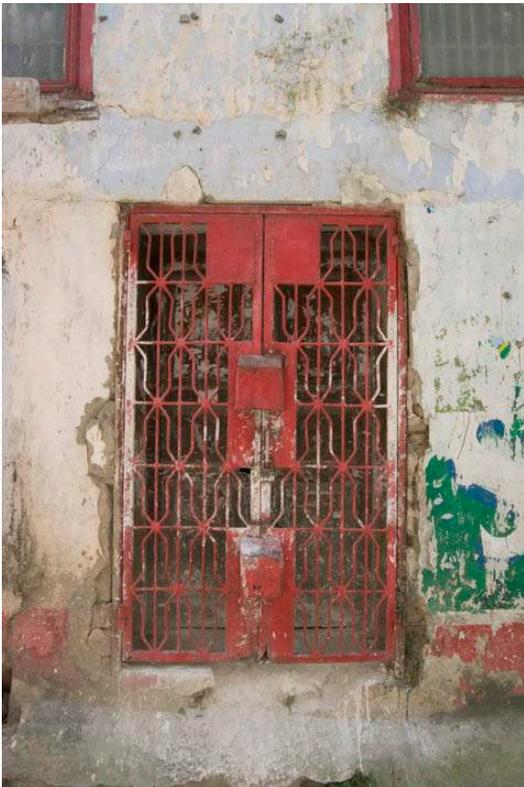




Image 4



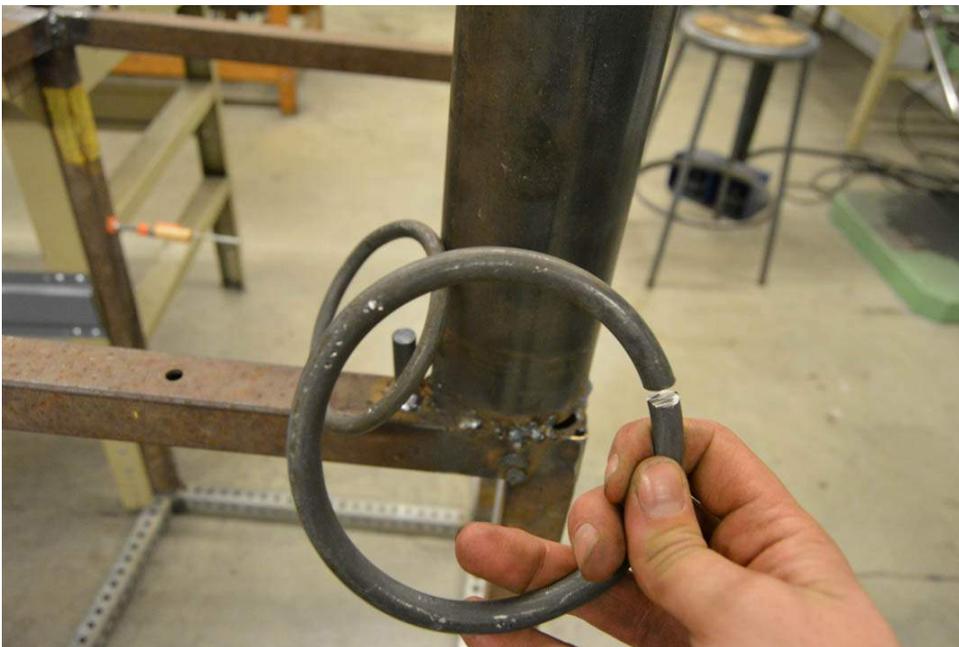
Images 5 - 6



Images 7 - 11







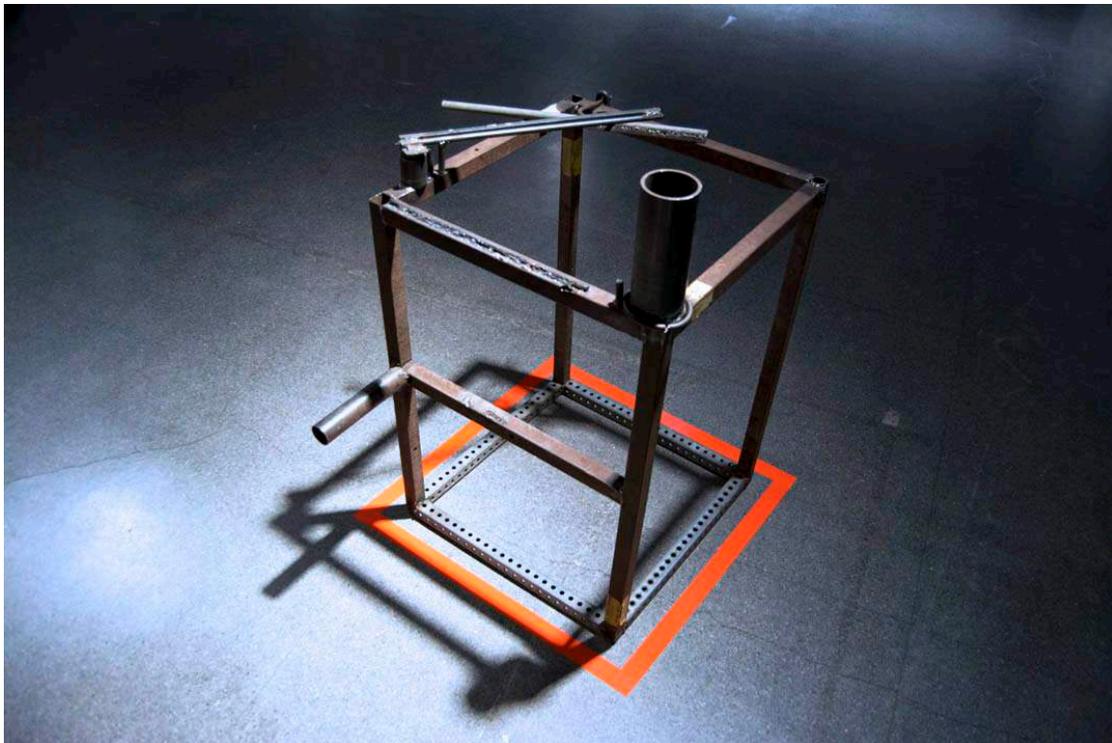
Images 12 - 14



Image 15



Images 16 - 20







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