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## E-ARTISANS

### Contemporary design for the global market

*Tom Barker and Ashley Hall*

#### Touchdown in Ghana

The first thing you notice as you step out of the aeroplane in Accra – the capital of Ghana – is the air. Thick and heavy with humidity, the air carries the ancient smell of brown earth – reminiscent of baked bread and sewers – intermingled with the sounds of wildlife and city chaos. Like any tropical country, Ghana is a slow place that bides its time; thanks to the climate it has to. But like the African elephant, a sluggish start is no indication of the speed that the country will attain when it accelerates. When we last flew to Ghana we sat next to an oil prospector who was flying out to greet the first barrel of oil from the vast new reserves just discovered offshore. Perhaps now, the elephant is on the move.

In 2009, Ghana became a focal point for us as the latest in a series of annual international design collaborations called GoGlobal. Initiated in 2005, each GoGlobal collaboration has had a different theme, derived from preparatory visits and discussions with host partners. We wanted the themes to have both local and global relevance, and to avoid ‘design tourism’. In other words, the results needed to have ongoing value that lasted beyond the project period.

The aim of GoGlobal Ghana was to consider whether the creative industries in a developing country could be nurtured through design collaboration and an e-commerce model to contribute significant economic growth through increasing the level of international trade. The project was initiated with three phases planned for execution: a creative studio with innovation design engineering<sup>1</sup> students from the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London and the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Ghana; an e-commerce process for supply, distribution and marketing; and finally a ‘hub’ location to facilitate project delivery and dissemination to other African regions.

We wanted to establish an evolved model for contemporary design collaboration, based on analysis of the previous GoGlobal annual project collaboration parameters

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and results. Our aims were to develop skills of working in other cultures; develop a global perspective on design; understand differences and similarities between design cultures in developed (industrialized) and developing countries; evolve an understanding of wellbeing and satisfaction through work beyond wealth accumulation; develop relationships and networks for global collaborations in design and production; evolve social and cultural elements with respect to design, exploration of personal goals and opportunities in life; gain an understanding of skills through knowledge transfer; transcend the limitations of monocultural working; and most generally, to encourage curiosity and creativity.

### GoGlobal history

GoGlobal began with a relatively spontaneous visit to China by Tom Barker and 18 postgraduate design students from the RCA in 2005, and has now developed into a collaborative design research and networking activity. Participating institutions are the Royal College of Art, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), the London School of Economics (LSE), the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), and a number of other global partnering organizations. Past GoGlobal projects have included: 'Products for Beijing' and subsequently 'Design to mitigate the effects of consumerism' in Beijing, China with Tsinghua University (2005, 2007); 'Massclusivity'<sup>2</sup> in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand with Thai Creative Design Centre (TCDC) (2006); and 'The future of food' with Tsukuba University in Japan (2008).

All of the previous GoGlobal projects have focused on international design collaborations with industry and academia at a postgraduate masters design level. Our research into formats for successful collaboration was conducted through an empirical evolution of working models, a better understanding of collaborative partnerships, and integration of product innovation, production, social and economic factors. The selection of countries aimed to explore design collaboration in a range of both developing and developed countries in distinct cultures, allowing a comparative assessment of the results. Each of the GoGlobal exercises tried to answer the question: what are the most effective ways in which designers from different countries can collaborate to tackle a complex regional brief of the host country, creating better and more appropriate designs than each could as an individual?

GoGlobal projects have helped the participants gain an understanding of diverse cultures by learning to design in collaboration, and to gain a global perspective on their creative outlook. Designs from the projects in 2005, 2006 and 2007 have been exhibited and the designs from GoGlobal Thailand in 2006 have been commercialized and manufactured for sale; the projects have also been featured in the international design and lifestyle press, such as *Blueprint*<sup>3</sup>, *Axis*<sup>4</sup> and *Elle Decoration*<sup>5</sup>.

After GoGlobal visited Japan in 2008, the protagonists (by then Tom Barker, Ashley Hall and Garrick Jones of the LSE) were persuaded to set themselves a more ambitious, risky and complex challenge: one that could potentially make a more strategic difference to a country that could notably benefit from wealth creation

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through design. The previous GoGlobal Thailand project suggested that design could deliver regional benefits by bridging the gap between policy and implementation. Our partnership with TCDC brought together RCA and Thai designers to produce a range of products that acted as exemplars to promote Thai crafts, evolve contemporary Thai design language and promote the use of design to maintain and create new craft skills.

The team needed a welcoming host country that was politically and economically stable. Ghana was selected as the location for the project after discussions with the British Council, and following visits to the United Nations in Geneva, along with a follow up visit to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) XII in Accra, Ghana, and meetings with potential Ghanaian collaborators. The enthusiasm of local collaborators, the country's vibrant creative culture, and the high profile of creatives there all had a strong influence on the decision to be based in Ghana. There is also a rich cultural history of craft production in Ghana, from the gold, clothing and textile designs of the Ashanti region, through to stools, jewellery, carving, metalwork, and woven baskets.

GoGlobal Ghana was particularly influenced by the UN's UNCTAD studies of global creative industries. UNCTAD's 2008 Creative Economy Report, 'The challenge of assessing the creative economy towards informed policy-making', highlighted the potential socio-economic and cultural value of creative industries:

*... the interface among creativity, culture, economics and technology, as expressed in the ability to create and circulate intellectual capital, has the potential to generate income, jobs and export earnings while at the same time promoting social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development.<sup>6</sup>*

In the UK for example, creative industries now contribute 7.3% to the national economy, of which around 1% is artefact design, craft and fashion. But for developing countries, there is a question of how to leverage design creativity for social and economic benefit using sustainable models given the context of low levels of industrialization, poor transport and infrastructure, and weak financial systems.

**Creative Africa and Ghana's UK connection**

Africa is a vast and diverse continent of 54 countries. It may be argued that this diversity is greater than that of Europe; for example, Africa is estimated to have 2,000–3,000 spoken languages. Although many of the countries on the continent are very poor, the last decade has seen economic growth and stability in an increasingly large number of states. There is also no shortage of creativity: today's African writers, designers, architects, and film-makers are increasingly making their mark globally. African-based contemporary creative industries are less well established, however (though even here there are exceptions such as Nollywood, Nigeria's answer to Hollywood, which is the continent's most prolific film-making industry).

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The UK has a strong connection with Ghana, which was a British colony until it achieved independence in 1957. The Ghanaian ethnic group in Britain is the largest African presence after Nigerians, and there is a great deal of movement of Ghanaians between the UK and the homeland. British Ghanaians are extremely well represented among the UK's top creatives, and include the architect David Adjaye; the artist Chris Ofili; Ekow Eshun, Artistic Director of the ICA; Ozwald Boateng OBE, bespoke couturier; the musician Sway; and John Akomfrah, the film director.

### Ghanaian Economy and culture

Any international collaboration, design or otherwise, is vastly improved when there is some mutual understanding of cultural differences. Our hosts from both organizations gave us invaluable advice and guidance on Ghanaian culture and society. This was vital, as there is little literature available, although we did track down an invaluable book in Accra called *Ghana: Understanding the People and Their Culture* by John Kuada and Yao Chachah<sup>7</sup> – a fast introduction to the customs and history of the country.

Our hosts referred many times to how happy people were in Ghana, and although this seemed self-evident we decided to have a look at world rankings to see just how happy Ghanians were compared with other nations. Ghana's ranking among the 'happiest' countries of the world is 51, ahead of China (54), Greece (58), India (69) and Zimbabwe (99). (Source: 1995 - 2007 World Values Surveys)<sup>8</sup>. Clearly this happiness doesn't relate directly to personal wealth; Ghanaian GDP per capita at \$3,000 is a twelfth of the UK's. On this measure from the World Economic Outlook Database for October 2007, Ghana is ranked at number 18 out of the 53 African countries (Egypt is \$5,600, South Africa is \$14,500). However, Ghana's economy— with a focus on cocoa, gold, diamonds and lumber—has been growing quickly since 2000 and has tripled its GDP in just over eight years. GDP (PPP adjusted) in 2008 was \$70 billion, with an economic growth rate of 6% in 2008. Like most African countries, the global financial crisis in 2008 has had little effect, since the banks in Ghana have negligible exposure to foreign debt.<sup>9</sup>

This growth was promising, and because of the nature of the GoGlobal project we wanted to know if Ghanaians were particularly entrepreneurial, as is sometimes claimed. (The International Entrepreneurship website, for example, notes that '... the entrepreneurial environment is vibrant and growing in comparison to its other West African counterparts'.<sup>10</sup>) Could local designers leverage any value created by the design project? Anecdotally, we certainly met a lot of enterprising individuals in Ghana, whether they were selling mobile phone top-up cards by the road, dried bananas in traffic jams, or operating personal electronic money transfers with the UK. But were we meeting typical Ghanaians?

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## Leveraging design

We had three hosts and project collaborators in Ghana who included our academic partners from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology's (KNUST) College of Art and Design, based in Ghana's second city of Kumasi, and the Aid to Artisans organization in Accra and Kumasi who provided the project with national supply chain experience, market intelligence, and the viewpoints of Ghanaian craftspeople. The project partners for the e-commerce delivery elements were ShopAfrica53/BSL, based in Accra. The British Council Accra also provided us with meeting space, information and a final launch venue to present the finished products to artisans and potential investors.

Our selection of KNUST also had some useful entrepreneurial benefits. Kumasi is surrounded by gold mines and is the ancient start of the historic Trans-Saharan gold route that ends in North Africa where it connects by sea to Europe. Millennia of trading have resulted in a rich enterprise culture of small businesses and the up-front pitching of new business ideas that we were to grow accustomed to witnessing on the city streets. Added to this is the impact of the British colonial era and exposure to global trading ideas, initially by sea trading then later on by other routes.

The e-Artisan project looked at ways of leveraging design creativity in Ghana. The innovative aspect of our focus was the use of two key elements designed to work together in a syndetic (connective) manner: first, the use of collaboration to develop designs; and second, marketing through e-commerce models. Our project method of contemporary design collaboration has evolved iteratively, based on feedback and observation. Over time, the quality of the work produced by GoGlobal indicates that it could be successfully extended into a commercial-academic joint venture. Industrial design and production in a developing country must be able to address the issues of reduced levels of industrialisation, poor transport and infrastructure and lack of access to finance. The reduced levels of industrialization restrict the choice of materials and production processes, as well as impacting on quality control and packaging. Poor transport and infrastructure makes the supply chain more complex and costly, as well as affecting reliability. Damage to merchandise is also a problem. A further issue to contend with in developing countries relates to financial transactions at every level relating to the payment for goods and materials, as well as shipping. Banking can be rudimentary; not all of the stakeholders involved in a project may have access to financial institutions, interest rates can be very high. Ghana itself is heavily cash based and most people do not have bank accounts; however, the use of cash, while it may simplify the process and ensure the flow of capital, invites fraud. Furthermore, returns' policies are problematic when goods have been shipped overseas. E-commerce helps to mitigate these difficulties. An online customer interface and ordering system can meet a wide variety of demands: marketing and branding, processing all financial transactions throughout the supply chain, tracking and delivery, and supply chain management. E-commerce also has the advantage of being able to operate without traditional infrastructure.

BSL, the project e-commerce partners in Ghana, established ShopAfrica53.com in 2008/9. ShopAfrica53 is a web system for browsing and purchasing merchandise

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from around Africa. The system currently operates only in Ghana, but will expand to cover other African countries over time. BSL have also developed a scratch-card system for purchases, which ensures that the commercial supply chain is always cash-flow positive. This is an important point when selling artefacts long-distance, since non-payment could present great financial difficulties for an artisan if they have paid for materials in advance and started their work. Through courier relationships, BSL facilitate the transport of artefacts within Ghana and internationally. Additionally, BSL have an alternative banking method in development that allows artisans to be paid via their mobile phones, access their balance, and make payments to others. Mobile phones are in widespread use in Ghana, and BSL have an automated messaging service to communicate orders and information from the website to artisans around the country. Although GoGlobal Ghana will eventually have its own web portal which will link to ShopAfrica53 for all transactions.

**Project collaboration**

To develop designs, Ghanaian students and the RCA students were randomly paired up: one Ghanaian and one RCA student per team. The RCA students were a diverse international mix, coming from over 14 different countries. Of the 30 pairings, the majority said they worked extremely well or well together. It was clear that three teams had some problems collaborating, and that these issues revolved around communication rather than method or creative differences. In terms of method, the Ghanaian students' approach tended to be more spontaneous and less research-based than the RCA students. Although this contrasted with a slightly more theoretical stance among RCA students, the Ghanaians had very practical experience of making and were able to identify processes and means of assistance very quickly to facilitate prototyping. Both groups had a comprehensive understanding of the technologies for e-commerce.

One of the main project challenges revolved around the idea of cultural transfer. If an object presents too much embedded culture then its function and opportunity to fit into a reasonable number of diverse environments is compromised. Conversely, too little cultural transfer results in a more neutral design, which will be seen as a commodity indistinguishable from competitors, and thus unable to leverage its source potential. With the help of the project advisors the RCA and KNUST students were able to balance each other, the former offering advice on the appeal of Western markets and the latter providing rich local sources of inspiration. The final products – 26 in all – were designed and prototyped in the surprisingly short time of ten days, highlighting the speed, quality and energy of the dispersed craft and making networks around Kumasi. Students often communicated designs verbally; using templates and sketch models enabled wider craft interpretation, allowing the artisans room to develop the objects according to their skills and resources. The designs were innovative and provocative, but also referenced local materials and creative influences. These results illustrated how collaborative interdisciplinary projects have the potential to overcome some of the hurdles for generating new export products for developing economies.

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Source: Photo courtesy of the Royal College of Art and KNUST

**Discussion of outcomes**

The very international nature of the students helped the group to embrace the idea of developing products with a global appeal. It was noticed that the Ghanaian students had the same ability to ‘jam’ creatively at the concept design stage as the RCA students, much like musicians performing together in an improvised mode. The ability to ‘jam’ tends to require a relaxed, responsive and inclusive attitude to a fellow collaborator, characteristics considered very typical of Ghanaian society, so this may have been a factor in working style. Creatively, the Ghanaian students readily embraced the benefits of designing and prototyping concepts at high speed, and were prepared to experiment with relatively little concern about design risk. This also may be a cultural trait and is an advantage, as the RCA students were primarily from developed countries and tended to be more risk averse, which can be a significant barrier to innovation in design.

The impact of the ‘e-commerce-ready’ design constraint was notable. The artefacts were generally small, and the larger ones (such as a side table) could be flat-packed for transportation. About a third of the designs had an embedded or related web component for users and feature-enhancement, customization or post-sales support and servicing. This feature is unique in allowing a mix of artisanal inter-

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pretation and user-requested customization. The work was considered in the context of an international distribution of potential customers.

It is interesting to observe that the global belt between the tropic of Capricorn and the tropic of Cancer has few successful industrialization models. This is true across the African continent. There are many reasons for this, but one of the common themes revolves around culture and inclusion. Historical attempts at modernizing African manufacturing have failed because they have tried to 'teleport' Westernized industrial models based on mechanization, homogenization and labour reduction. Sub-Saharan Africa needs more inclusive labour models, with cultural and social tie-ins that connect large numbers of people to the rest of the globe. Our approach sought to use design to refocus the large networks of craft makers spread throughout the towns, cities and countryside who currently supply basic artefacts and repair and recycle mechanical products towards export markets. The inventiveness and speed of makers in this region, for example the Kumasi mechanic who rebuilt three buses into one using an angle grinder and a welding torch, are legendary. The economic imperative for this approach is corroborated by recent developments in the theory of microeconomic structures, which emphasize the importance of urban trade and its role in creating mega-cities in developing economies. Part of this research proposes that craft and small-scale industrial production can be one of the catalysts for agglomeration into dense urban trading zones. At a time when large urban structures in developing economies are rapidly increasing in size, facilitating the creative interface between craft and design with economics can help develop more effective strategies.

## Conclusions

KNUST have kindly offered to host a GoGlobal design research centre in their newly built university campus museum to focus the research and commercial future of the project, while the UN/UNDP have expressed an interest in supporting and disseminating a successful future enterprise model to other African regions.

Although currently only focused on Ghana, the research indicates that contemporary design collaboration used in conjunction with e-commerce models may have the potential to grow the creative industries in developing countries. The scale and rate of this growth has not yet been ascertained and the e-commerce implementation is still underway. This work differs from other similar endeavours, in that it combines the dual elements of design collaboration and e-commerce in a developing country, effectively providing a process for design, production, customer reach and delivery into the markets of developed countries. The e-commerce aspect also had a significant impact on how the design participants responded to the design briefs. At a higher level the ability of educational design projects to operate in new spaces between regional or national policy and on-the-ground implementation promises new opportunities and reflects the historical trajectory of design thinking into ever wider circles.



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## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank the participating and supporting organizations for their enthusiastic support in GoGlobal Africa. All our academic participants at KNUST. Bridget Kyerematen-Darko, executive director of Aid to Artisans, and Professor Glenn Lewis for their wisdom and knowledge of Ghana and design, as well as the participating artisans. ShopAfrica53/BSL for e-commerce aspects. Our long-term GoGlobal co-developer: Garrick Jones (LSE). Advice and hosting of events: Edna Dos Santos and her colleagues at UNCTAD; the British Council in the UK and Accra, Ghana. Founding co-partners for GoGlobal research: RMIT University Melbourne, Australia. Background research information: Department of Trade and Industry, Accra, Ghana. Project funding: Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC), UK. Project equipment: Tools for Self Reliance. Special independent researchers and tutors: Genna Wilkinson, Sally Haworth, Elisa Hudson, Nanice El Gammel.

## Notes

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