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## Cultural Production in Qatar: Design, Dialog and the New Authentic

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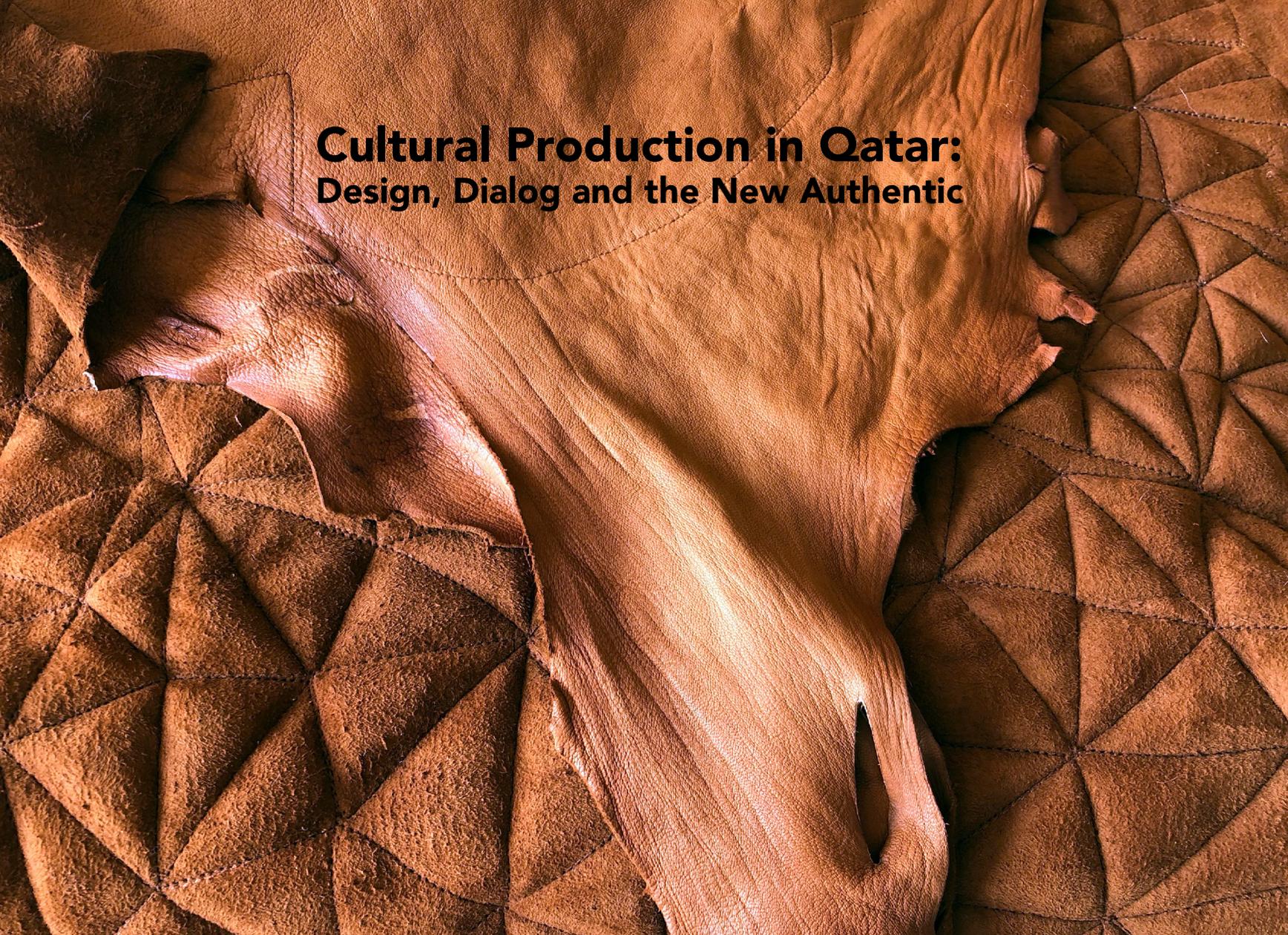
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**Cultural Production in Qatar:  
Design, Dialog and the New Authentic**

## Acknowledgements

I still remember my first visit to VCUarts Qatar, on May 10th, 2017 at 2pm, I had the opportunity to meet Rab McClure, the director of the MFA program. After visiting the university and having been introduced to the Masters, I was full of enthusiasm and motivation to join VCUarts but I was far from expecting that day to be the first step into the most significant journey of my life.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Rab for the opportunity he has given me, for his continuous support and for believing in me. I would also like to express special regards to Marco Bruno for his support and honest feedback, to Basma and Denielle for their generosity, passion and gentle guidance.

I would like to recognize the invaluable assistance provided by Diane Derr as well as her renowned passion and dedication in teaching and empowering students. I would like to thank her for never failing to share her immense knowledge which has considerably impacted my thesis development as well as for the unequalled sense of reasoning and structure that she has brought into my projects during my time at VCU.

I am indebted to all the artisans from Souq Waqif and to designers from VCUarts Qatar for their contribution, time and dedication to my project. Thanks to Haytham Rassam, Sameh Faraj, Mohamad Antar, Mohammad Al Tahar, Bassem and Yahya Al Ounissi, for their hospitality, generosity in sharing knowledge, willingness and enthusiasm. Special regards to Stella Colaleo, Nathan Davis , Jennyfer Marie Davis , Aisha Al Sowaidi, Law Alsobrook, Rayan Browning, Pornprapha Phatanateacha, Mohammad Suleiman, Yasmeen Suleiman and Jo Momean for their valuable insights that have molded the unfolding of my research.

I am eternally grateful to my family in Tunisia whose unconditional love and support have accompanied me through my journey of studies abroad, to my sister Imen in Qatar who managed to make me feel home even if I was miles away. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my supportive friends Zeinah and Mimi whom I have met thanks to VCUarts Qatar and who have become my MFA family.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Qatar, as a rapidly modernizing Arab country with a highly heterogeneous emergent community, is working to achieve a balance between accelerated development and cultural identity. Qatar's cross-cultural environment and diverse attributes offer unprecedented opportunity to produce forward-looking, "100% Qatari Products," that express a New Authentic.

This thesis explores social dynamics governing cultural production in Qatar, and it challenges unproductive manifestations of social hierarchy—particularly related to norms surrounding the default working relationship between designers and artisans. The research highlights and celebrates the inherent diversity of the Qatari artifact, creating a platform and methods wherein designers and artisans collaborate equally and meaningfully. This thesis re-envision authenticity as a celebration of magnified possibilities of creativity and innovation that emanate from a cross-cultural environment.

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Souq Waqif in 1955 and 1960

In recent decades Qatar has undergone a significant transformation due to rapid modernization. This has impacted the national cultural heritage. In an effort to maintain and preserve a national identity and build a contemporary Qatari heritage, a number of institutions, including Qatar Museums, Katara Cultural Village, and Souq Waqif, have developed programs for producing and displaying authentic cultural artifacts, in order to preserve tradition and rebuild appreciation for traditional objects.

The construction of Souq Waqif, a market located in Doha, demonstrates the promotion of traditional culture through modern initiatives. Souq Waqif was "built," or "rebuilt," depending on one's perspective, in 2006, as a renovation of an old marketplace, which was famous for its standing Bedouin vendors. The restoration of the market was driven by the Private Engineering Office (PEO), a government agency of the State of Qatar that falls under the auspices of the Amiri Diwan of Qatar and receives its directives from H.H. the Amir.

In 1940, the old market was described by the British Political Resident as a place that, "...consisted of mean fly-infested hovels, the roads were dusty tracks, there was no electricity, and the people had to fetch their water in skins and cans from wells two or three miles outside the town."<sup>1</sup> The metamorphosis from that description to the current Souq Waqif is profound. Today the Souq has become a gathering place for Qataris, expats and tourists. It is home to many luxury boutique hotels, restaurants, franchised coffee shops



Figure 2: Souq Waqif, Doha, Qatar, photo credit Marhaba

and shisha lounges, as well as a market for traditional garments, spices, handicrafts, and souvenirs.

When Souq Waqif was reconstructed in 2006, the State of Qatar brought artisans from various countries into the handicraft sector of the souq, employing a range of skills and diverse backgrounds to produce traditional and authentic artifacts. Today, many of these artisans are still working in the souq in tiny shops producing, displaying and selling their products. For many years, they have been making the exact same products repeatedly and repetitively, using the exact same techniques and processes, faced with material limitations, inadequate equipment and cramped space—and often—lacking the freedom to revise their processes or even make certain objects. As Souq Waqif is intended to be the cultural heart of Doha and to promote cultural tourism, the Private Engineering Office was—and still is—heavily involved in operations within the souq. It dictates who can operate shops and what artifacts can be displayed, according to cultural conventions. When asked about working conditions, an artisan in the souq, confided, “I cannot come to work if I am not wearing a thoub. These are instructions from above, we all have to look like locals to protect the authenticity of the souq.” The artisan’s comment revealed important insight into the local mindset and cultural context driving the souq.

In fact, artifacts made by foreign-born artisans—sometimes even imported from other countries—are displayed in tiny shops in the souq as emblems of Qatari

cultural identity and labelled, “100% Qatari Products.” Even when products are made in Qatar, one might be surprised to find that neither the artisans nor the materials are locally sourced.

Today, Qatar is home to an estimated 93 different nationalities, a diverse mix of people living together in a small country. This multicultural society is changing the traditional culture of the country, and the integration of local and foreign cultures is shaping the new, emergent Qatari identity. The large and pervasive expat community, at times, has pre-conceived ideas of what Qatari heritage should look like. These assumptions are based on artificiality and the use of symbolic stereotypes in the Gulf region. Expats themselves, today, equally contribute to the formation of this contemporary and emergent cultural identity.

The authentic-inauthentic dichotomy characterizing Souq Waqif is reflected in the discourse of Qatari nationals and both regional and western expats. Miriam Cooke, author of *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*, describes the diversity of viewpoint, “Some gush about the ‘restoration’ when others are contemptuous.”<sup>2</sup> Some people think that the restoration of the souq harms its authenticity and realness, while others consider the souq a representation of Qatari culture, values, and traditions.



Figure 3: Shop labelled ‘100% Qatari Product’ in Souq Waqif

Cooke cites a survey by Jocelyn Sage Mitchell from Northwestern University Qatar in 2013, where 77% Qataris, among 798 questioned, consider Souq Waqif a celebration of their past and heritage. Cooke concludes, "It does not matter that the souq is new, what matters is the effect of authenticity it produces."<sup>3</sup>

This research intends to generate new or alternative authentic cultural artifacts in Qatar. "100% Qatari Products," are authentic largely due to socially constructed concepts according to specific contexts. The emergent identity of the State of Qatar is unique and presents great opportunities for a multicultural society that fosters innovation, embraces diversity and expands new dimensions of authenticity.

Unlike the artisans working in Souq Waqif, designers in Qatar—whether locals or expats—are well equipped to perform in authentic and creative ways. Designers have greater access to the latest technologies, new materials, fabrication processes and innovative design approaches, as well as access to a wide variety of training and institutions of higher education.

Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in Qatar (VCUarts Qatar), has been the hub for educating and producing designers and design research in Qatar since 1998. The institution is generously supported by Qatar Foundation, and is sited in Education City. Students and faculty have access to fabrication facilities such as its fabrication lab, woodshop, print lab, jewelry studio, kiln, sewing machines,

media lab and materials library. VCUarts Qatar has substantially impacted Qatar's emerging design industries and has served as a significant catalyst for growth in the areas of art and design. For example, the institution hosts the biennial international art and design conference Tasmeeem Doha, bringing foreign expertise to engage with a local audience. Designers working with and graduating from this institution value collaboration, experimentation, innovation and diversity.

This thesis research seeks to more effectively pair designers—who are trained to work collaboratively, and who are trained to innovate—with highly skilled artisans working in the souq. The research acknowledges social dynamics governing cultural production in Qatar, while it challenges and seeks to remedy unproductive manifestations of social hierarchy—particularly related to norms surrounding the default working relationship between designers and artisans. The aim of this project is to highlight and celebrate the inherent diversity of the Qatari product, creating a platform and method wherein designers and artisans collaborate equally and meaningfully, to drive the authenticity of Qatar's cultural production.

This is a design exploration into the heterogenous and multifaceted cultures existing in the state of Qatar. It is not intended to be a sociological or anthropological discourse on the authentic culture or identity of the region.

Figure 4: Symbolic *hammal* with wheelbarrow in Souq Waqif



## LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity does not have one single universal definition, it is viewed from a plurality of perspectives; hence, various dimensions and aspects construct a complex view of the term and its multiple uses.

The concept of authenticity, in relation to identity and belonging, when it comes to cultural heritage places, varies in meaning according to the audience. Tazim Jamal—an Associate Professor in Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University—and Steve Hill—journalist, author and speaker—have developed a framework of indicators for authenticity, categorizing authenticity as follows.

In the first dimension, authenticity is defined as objective and “real.” This notion is based on the existence of an objectively real world, which is considered a standard—a confirmation of what is measured, true, genuine, accurate and authentic.<sup>4</sup> It is also related to the past by its belonging to an “historic time.” In fact, according to Dean MacCannell, who is cited in Jamal and Hill’s essay, “Historicity or at least the suggestion of a tie to something in the past, like a previous era or a pre-modern culture or tradition, is part of what qualifies an entity as ‘authentic.’”<sup>5</sup>

In the second dimension, based on a constructivist approach, aspects of authenticity are defined as socially constructed rather than objectively made. This approach to authenticity is situated within a “heritage time,” where artifacts become objects of a dialectic of time and place

narratives. Cultural objects are considered authentic—not because they are inherently so—but because their realness or authenticity is constructed by the perceptions and beliefs of a given audience, living in a specific social context, in addition to their proper reliance on historical or time-related significations. According to Jamal and Hill’s essay, “‘Heritage time’ is situated within a constructivist or social constructionist approach. Where the object is embedded in an inter-subjective and discursive matrix, authenticity can emerge through negotiation.”<sup>6</sup>

The constructivist version of authenticity also accounts for changes in perceptions of history and time. As paraphrased in “Reconceptualizing Object Authenticity,”<sup>7</sup> Nelson Graburn affirms that over time, what was considered as inauthentic might become authentic—a process defined as “Emergent Authenticity.” According to Graburn, “Products that were initially counted as artificial and obviously constructed, eventually get incorporated into local culture and perceived as such. They become authentic with the passage of time.”<sup>8</sup>

Authenticity, whether objectivist, constructivist or emergent, remains a fundamental dialectic within the wider issue of the fast development of modern social structures, while preserving an identity and a sense of belonging to the tradition. While addressing the issue of authenticity in the Arab world, the Palestinian author Issa Boullata affirms that, “Tradition loomed to many Arabs as a rock of sure durability, safety and strength to which they could cling amid the

insecurity and instability of change. Only in tradition could many of them find their identity and cultural authenticity.”<sup>9</sup>

Qatar is an Arab society dealing with questions of cultural authenticity. Due to rapid modernization, the transformation of the country to a cosmopolitan and modern state has had a significant impact on national cultural heritage and identity, which has led to an urgent need to preserve a Qatari cultural identity in order to achieve the balance between modernization and preservation of traditions.

Preservation of national heritage and authentic local identity is part of the 2030 Qatar National Vision—an economic, cultural and social framework developed in 2008 by the government. It states, “Other societies have successfully molded modernization around local culture and traditions. Qatar’s National Vision responds to this challenge and seeks to connect and balance the old and the new.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, modern life in Qatar needs to be respectful of local values and culture. In an effort to maintain and preserve national identity and build contemporary Qatari heritage, a number of institutions, including the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum of Qatar, Katara Cultural Village and Souq Waqif have developed programs for producing and displaying authentic cultural artifacts that embody Qatari identity, in order to educate the younger generation about the evolving Qatari culture. In fact, Boullatta considers that the Arab culture should not be considered “...as [a] monolithic entity, permanent and static in its nature, given

once and for all, then handed down from generation to generation.”<sup>11</sup> Culture is thus placed within a continuum of change and alterations, not only by the individual experience, background and values, but also by the history and traditions of the region. Hence, culture cannot exist outside this continuous tide of adjustments and readjustments, placing Boullatta’s statement within the wider frame of constructivist authenticity.

As a case in point, Sheikha Al Mayassa, Chairperson of Qatar Museums, during the Seventh Biennial Hamad bin Khalifa Symposium on Islamic Art, described the National Museum of Qatar as “...embrace[ing] Qatar’s history, present and future ambition,”<sup>12</sup> and promoting a contemporary heritage and authentic experience through a multidisciplinary approach. In her speech, she stated, “It’s a living museum and its narratives will be constantly updated depending on the events that take place around us.”<sup>13</sup> Her speech emphasized the importance of identity and the contemporary approach Qatar is taking to shape an emergent authentic cultural identity.

The complexity of Qatari heritage is of interest to a number of historians and researchers, which results in a variety of perspectives on the subject. As examples, one might cite Eric Weiner’s *The Geography of Bliss*, in which he described his immediate impression of the country as a place, “...without culture and history.”<sup>14</sup> Weiner—along with others who express skepticism about the depth of Qatar’s heritage—has been challenged in an

article published by Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico, in which they analyze and deconstruct the aim of large-scale cultural projects in Qatar, “...shaped by Western heritage discourse and foreign expertise.”<sup>15</sup> The authors stand against defining one single homogenous identity for Qatar. Instead, they cite heterogeneous heritages and multifaceted identities coexisting under what they call a, “modern surface,” related to certain beliefs, traditions, social structures, fundamental values and motivations of the native Qatari population.<sup>16</sup>

Thereby, one might affirm that authenticating the heterogeneous multifaceted culture of Qatar could be challenging and will depend on the latitude of diversity the country is willing to allow. Furthermore, Qatar could be considered a platform for a unique opportunity to reconsider and re-envision authenticity as a celebration of magnified possibilities of creativity and innovation that emanate from a cross-cultural environment. The country has become the very proof that what was conceived as an inherent, inherited and static quality—i.e., authenticity—actually emerges as an experience engendered by a highly heterogeneous land, gathering diverse attributes in a way that remains unique and unprecedented. Thus, the transitioning emergent identity and cultural authenticity of Qatar are now calling for a re-exploration of the notion of authenticity through the promotion of cultural appreciation and the contribution of its transitioning community.

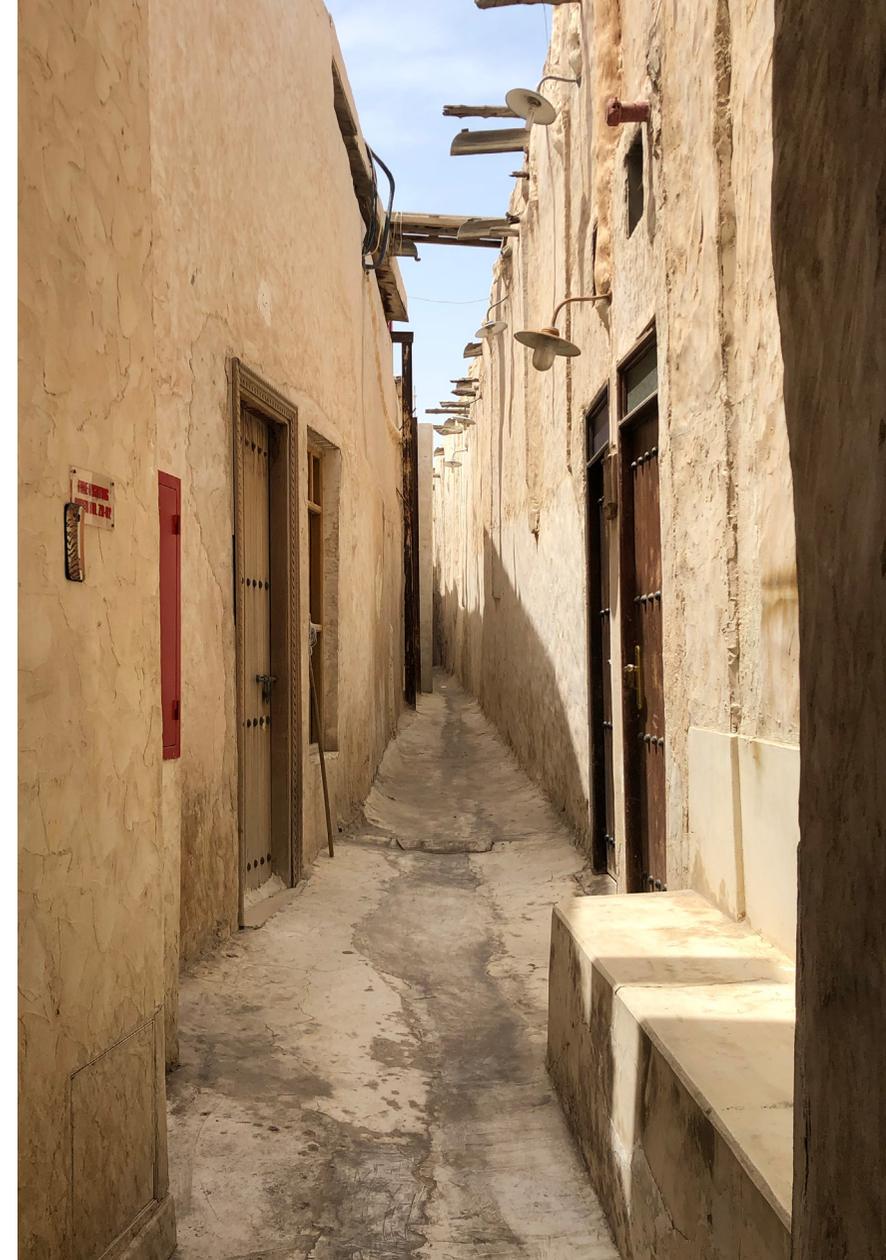


Figure 5: Narrow Alley in Souq Waqif

## PRECEDENTS

### Irthi Contemporary Craft Council

The Irthi Contemporary Craft Council is an organization established in the UAE under an Amiri decree and chaired by her Highness Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, wife of His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah.

The Project's main focus is to preserve traditional skills and cultural heritage in the UAE for current and future generations by empowering female artisans in the region. Within its different initiatives, such as *Artisan Skills Exchange Program*, and *Crafts Dialogue*, the council seeks to enhance craftswomen's skills and capabilities by developing training and engagement programs with designers, teaching design skills and merging traditional and contemporary crafts. In addition, this initiative seeks to create new market opportunities for the contemporary Emirati product.

According to a statement on its website, "The council promotes traditional crafts to bring them into the 21st century, engaging with artisans and practitioners to incorporate new technologies and practices that create modern narratives and open up new markets."<sup>17</sup> Authentic, contemporary products developed through creative collaborations between female artisans from the UAE, and designers from different cultures and disciplinary backgrounds, using innovative combinations of traditional and modern techniques, are being exhibited in a number of events such as the London Design Fair and the Liber International Book Fair, in Madrid.



Figure 6: Irthi Contemporary Craft Council, First Product Collection

The Irthi project is a model initiative within the Arab world, which examines and re-defines authenticity by forming connections between design and craft, while aiming to shape an emergent culture's relationship to heritage. The appeal of this project lies in merging foreign and UAE crafts, as well as in the way it explores analogies between different materials, crafts and heritages. It aims to enhance the craft by merging hand and machine techniques, as well as by demonstrating how tradition and innovation can coexist within the same project. However, one might be skeptical about the amount of inclusiveness of the so-called craft dialog, as artisans are not equally credited. Instead, it is better described as a design and production dialog, which features pairings of international and local designers. As documented in the Irthi catalog, "The programme allows for a design and production dialogue between pairs of international and local designers to create collections that combine Emirati and European elements."<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the project's noble intentions are undermined by the plainly documented bias, which places designers over artisans. This dichotomy lingers from a colonial perspective, which considered indigenous crafts to be a primitive, lower form of making, in contrast with design, which has historically been viewed as educated, refined and dominant.

This project's shortcoming is the absence of an egalitarian dialog—a system to encourage relational interactions, where everyone (artisans and designers) would be encouraged to contribute expertise equally, and where everyone's contribution would be properly recognised.

### **La Liste Tunisienne**

*La Liste Tunisienne* is an online platform, designed by Laurence Touitou, a Tunisian architect. The platform offers a collection of household items, produced by highly skilled artisans in Tunisia. According to Touitou, products are inspired by the Tunisian traditional life and adapted to a modern lifestyle. Touitou works with highly-skilled local artisans to produce traditional objects—which have been long been made in an inherited, traditional manner—but with renewed emphasis on quality, and with an eye to new potential applications. The same traditional objects, placed in a different context, are positioned and produced to appeal to modern customers.

*La Liste Tunisienne* promotes authentic traditional-contemporary Tunisian products, which are proposed as authentic, because they are locally handmade, using local resources. The objects are proposed as traditional-contemporary because—while they are made using traditional processes—they anticipate new design applications. The platform empowers local artisans by creating new sustainable market opportunities, and by showcasing their skills and capabilities.

Although Touitou's project is sustainable and ethical, it remains hierarchical. It neglects the opportunity to make a full collaboration between artisans and designers. Touitou's model treats artisans as commissioned executors—or as skilled laborers—but doesn't offer latitude for any creative

input from them. The products of *La Liste Tunisienne* respond to a need in the international marketplace, but without collaborative input from the artisans, they remain merely fashionable objects.



Figure 7: Artisan and Products from *La Liste Tunisienne*

## INVESTIGATIONS

### Intent

In order to move beyond a hegemonic colonial model of production, with a desire to facilitate more effective collaborations between artisans and designers, this thesis included a two-phase set of research investigations. The first phase sought to learn more about so-called “100% Qatari” products, to research the limitations, capabilities and opportunities of existing production. The second phase examined the relationship between artisans and designers, within the specific context of modern Qatar, and initiated collaborations charged with producing authentic outcomes. Research methods, performed as part of this thesis, included interviews, artifact analysis, questionnaires, participant journals, and collaborative experiments—conducted by pairing designers with artisans working in Souq Waqif.

### “100% Qatari Products”

Souq Waqif is considered the cultural heart of Doha. Locals describe it as, “An authentic representation of Qatari culture, values and traditions.”<sup>19</sup> Hence, interviews with artisans working in the souq sought to further understand the social, environmental, political and cultural context of, “100% Qatari Products,” and to define their features.

The handicraft sector of Souq Waqif is a narrow alley with a multitude of tiny shops on both sides. Artisans working in the shops have different cultural backgrounds (Yemeni, Egyptian, Indian, etc.) and practice various skills, such as plaster carving, woodworking, leather work, glass fusing, embroidery and ceramics.



Figure 8: Tags In Shops Declaring “100% Qatari Products”

Figure 9 on the next page: Multicultural Artisans Working in Souq Waqif



Examples of artifacts, produced and displayed to represent the local culture, include: The bisht, a flowing outer cloak worn by local men in official gatherings; ceramic incense burners, called mabkhara, popular items used for perfuming houses and clothing; leather belts, made to hold decorative swords and knives, worn by Qatari males as a sign of cultural pride on Qatar National Day; model wooden dhows, sold as souvenirs; and other seemingly random tourist items, including colored glass Christmas tree ornaments. Despite the variety, all of these products are sold in shops bearing tags on the door declaring: “100% Qatari Products.”

Interviews with artisans helped to further understand and categorize the “100% Qatari Products.” These interviews are available in Appendix 1 and are framed around five areas of interest:

- Artisan’s experience
- Handicraft in Qatar
- Design decisions
- Sponsor and social conditions
- Previous collaborations

These topics are crucial to providing a comprehensive understanding of the environmental and social context that impacts working conditions for artisans who make Qatari products.

Speaking directly with makers and learning about their respective backgrounds provided insight into their working environments and helped to understand how methods and facilities impact their capabilities. Questions about material sourcing sought to understand more about material availability in the Souq, in order to generate a list of materials to be considered for future projects. Questions related to sponsorship (Kafala) identified the extent of artisans’ freedom to impact the design of products they make, and define limits of interaction, according to rules set by their sponsors. Questions about previous collaborative experiences with designers surveyed existing views about collaboration, from the artisans’ perspective.

To ensure an open dialog during the interview process, the research process invested in developing a solid, up-front relationship with each artisan, by making several visits to discuss project intent, and express a clear interest in the work.

The following tables summarize interview responses:

	Who makes it?	What material?	Who buys it?	Function?	Observations
<b>Bags Belts Wallets Sheaths Pouf</b>	Haytham from Yemen	Finished Leather from Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia... Wool from Qatar	Qatari during the national day Tourist Residents of Qatar	Multiple utilitarian function: Everyday life use Traditional and occasional use	Made in Qatar for Qataris by a Yemeni with leather from many countries
<b>Dhow</b>	Hassib from India	Teak wood from India and Burma	Tourist Qatari institutions	To decorate many institutions in Qatar Souvenirs	A souvenir made in Qatar by an Indian craftsman with wood from Burma
<b>Bisht</b>	Mohamad from India	Silk and wool from India	Qatari men and women	Traditional dress wore for specific occasions: wedding, festivals, Eid...	Traditional product made in Qatar for Qataris by a non Qatari for Social significance
<b>Carpets Rugs</b>	Ahmed from Kashmir	Silk from India	Tourists Expats	Display Show of wealth Gift to other governments	Made in Qatar by an Indian with silk from Kashmir to give away to other countries
<b>Candle holders Lamps</b>	Mohamad Taher from Yemen	Plaster from Qatar	Tourists Qataris	Decoration Souvenirs	Made in Qatar for Qataris and non Qataris by a Yemeni with plaster from Qatar
<b>Perfume bottles Tea sets Christmas trees</b>	Mohamad Antar from Egypt	Glass from Egypt	Tourists Qataris Expats	Multiple utilitarian functions	Traditional products made in Qatar by an Egyptian for Qataris, non Qataris and Tourists
<b>Incense burners Coffee caps Water tanks</b>	Sameh Faraj from Egypt	Clay from Qatar	Tourists Qataris Expats	Decoration Souvenirs Utilitarian use	Traditional products made in Qatar by an Egyptian for Qataris, non Qataris and Tourists

Figure 10: Summary of interview results focused on available products of Souq Waqif

	Processes	Materials	Products	Projects	Limitations	Capabilities
<b>Haytham</b>	Designing Stitching Cutting Gluing	leather Wool	Bags Belts Wallets Sheaths Pouf	Customizable bag for a specific use	Unexperienced in understanding the technical factor of new products Market understanding and product commercialization	Material expertise Design new products Tailor making Customizable options
<b>Hassib</b>	Designing Carving Assembling	Wood	Qatari traditional Dhow		limited space and equipments limited time dedicated for work	Material expertise Ability to craft replicas
<b>Mohamed</b>	Designing Stitching Embroidering	Wool Silk	Bishts	New embroidery design other than the traditional one	Dependant on a team	Leadership Innovate in embroidery
<b>Ahmed</b>	Designing Weaving	Silk	Carpets Rugs	First carpet made in Qatar	Loom size Product commercialization No credit for the work	Access to material Choosing his designs (pattern, color..) Make unique valuable pieces
<b>Mohamad Tahar</b>	Moulding Carving	Plaster	Lamps Candle holders		Work space Material availabilities Limited size of the products	Access to material Choosing his designs (pattern, shape..)
<b>Mohamad Antar</b>	Blowing Shaping Fusing	Glass	Perfume bottles Tea sets Christmas trees	A set of perfume bottles for Sheikha Al Mayassa	No tools to make patterns Material availabilities Limited size of the products	Products variety Strong skills Customization
<b>Sameh</b>	Wheel throwing	Clay	Incense burners Coffee caps Water tanks	Customozed coffee cups and mabkhara orders	No tools available No Glazing Poor equipments Very limited collection (variety)	Access to material Choosing his designs (pattern, shape..) Skilled

Figure 11: Summary of interview results focused on the working conditions of artisans in Souq Waqif

According to artisans' answers—gathered after spending significant time interacting in the workspace, observing the work process, and observing interactions with clients—the heritage of so-called, “100% Qatari Products,” turned out to be extremely diverse. In actuality, items are made in Qatar by non-Qatari people, using imported material, inspired by a broad range of cultural influences, and they are bought by Qatari and non-Qatari communities for many purposes.

Paradoxically, one might argue that the non-Qatari aspects—of these “100% Qatari Products”—are precisely the qualities that define them as truly Qatari. Qatar, after all, is the stage for a vivacious, creative and innovative collection of possibilities that emanate from a diversified setting, populated with diversified communities. Qatari artifacts, which used to be considered monolithically authentic, actually exist due to circumstances engendered by a highly hybridized land, which brings together a variety of features. The uniquely thorough heterogeneity of “100% Qatari Products” paves the way for a New Authentic.

### Artisan-Designer Collaborations in Qatar: Capabilities, Limitations and Opportunities

The social context in Qatar contains class-based stratification and other unfortunate realities, including rules that limit opportunity, access and privilege. The environment creates working conditions that often inhibit—or even outright prevent—collaborations between artisans working in Souq Waqif and external partners.

Limitations documented in the previous table are political, psychological and infrastructural. All foreigners working in Qatar need to abide by the Kafala (sponsorship) system that is used to monitor migrant laborers. The system directly impacts local artisans, who are nearly always foreigners, and who are obliged to observe limitations imposed by their sponsors. Often, sponsors prevent foreign-born artisans from deviating from strict views of what they consider traditional or authentic within the souq. This political limitation leads directly to the psychological one. Some artisans were comfortable enough during interviews to reflect that the Kafala system's restricting dynamic has led them to work as mere project executors; they have become conditioned to avoid thinking outside the box. One artisan added that he had lost all interest in the creative aspect of his craft, because of his employer's, and his customers' lack of interest in originality. Finally, the artisans also described infrastructural limitations that further restrict their performance. They work in tiny workshops, which also serve as stores for the artifacts. They do not have enough space to expand or vary their production activity. Also, the

scarcity of appropriate material—better suited to their skill—also hampers them; some must bring material back to Qatar from their homelands when they travel to visit their families, once a year.

These limitations highlight the missed opportunity of benefiting from the capabilities of skilled artisans, who would flourish in a more open and supportive environment. During the interviews, many artisans explained they had inherited their skills, that their jobs result from ancestral experience transmitted down through generations. In addition to highly skilled artisans, the souq contains a plethora of materials, processes and tools related to the craft production of pottery, carpet weaving, plaster carving, woodworking, leather working, artistic glass fusing and glassblowing. Additionally, there is abundant evidence of human capability—traits such as willingness, enthusiasm and commitment—which emerge once the artisans feel empowered to actively participate and fully collaborate with designers, toward the production of a new artifact.

A goal of this thesis research is to seize the opportunity to bring designers and artisans together, to pair them on collaborative projects, which have been designed with an awareness of limitations and capabilities that currently exist in Qatar. This thesis explores new ways to benefit from the blended backgrounds and skills of designers and artisans. It researches the dynamics of collaborative exchange that occur between designers—considered, in this cultural context, as

possessing prestige and knowledge—and artisans—viewed, stereotypically, as less well educated, and of lower status.



Figure 12: The Handicraft Sector in Souq Waqif

## Participatory Design Process

To understand the range of collaborative opportunities between artisans and designers in Qatar, and to foster potential partnerships, the thesis included a participatory collaborative component, as a primary method of investigation. The goal was to establish strategic partnerships aimed at developing projects driven by the collaborative interests of selected artisans and designers. To proceed, it was essential to:

- Select participants
- Confirm the interest of collaborators
- Identify opportunities for design intervention
- Pair designers and artisans based on skills and disciplinary focus
- Support each collaboration through a detailed handbook
- Facilitate the collaborations with meetings, translation, follow up and deadlines

## Participants

Selection followed interviews with different artisans in the souq and designers linked to VCUarts Qatar, based on willingness to participate, availability, skills, and interest in the project .



**Mohammad Antar**

Nationality: Egyptian

Nature of Craft: Glass fusing/blowing



**Mohammad Al Taher**

Nationality: Yemeni

Nature of Craft: Gypsum engraving



**Sameh Farag**

Nationality: Egyptian

Nature of Craft: Pottery



**Nathan Davis**

Nationality: American

Background: Graphic Design



**Jennyfer Marie Davis**

Nationality: American

Background: Interior Design



**Stella Colaleo**

Nationality: Italian

Background: Architecture

## Identifying the Motivations of Participants

In order to define project intent and objectives heading into the collaborations, it was important to confirm the level of participants' interest. During the interviews, all selected designers and artisans articulated their collaboration goals.

For the artisans, the main priority is preserving the craft heritage inherited from their ancestors. They need to ensure the ability to continue transmitting what they know to future generations, to preserve their families' livelihood and way of life. Still, the artisans are also aware of the importance of creating new product lines—tuned to the current market in the modern context of Qatar—and seeking new market opportunities. Finally, the artisans acknowledge the need for better marketing strategies, to achieve higher visibility for their craft production.

Designers articulated their interest in learning new skills, and in being introduced to specific audiences and markets. As foreigners, they are also keen to deepen their knowledge about local production, and to expand their knowledge about local culture.

## Forms of Potential Design Intervention

Designers could participate by:

- Designing new products
- Redesigning existing products while changing shape, size, color or function
- Introducing new materials, tools, processes or technologies
- Applying traditional skills to meet new opportunities and challenges

## Strategic Partnerships

Criteria for partnership selection:

- Confirmed commitment to collaboration
- Disciplinary focus
- Portfolio and previous work

## Mohammad Antar + Nathan Davis:



**Mohammad Antar**  
Nationality: Egyptian  
Nature of Craft: Glass fusing/blowing



**Nathan Davis**  
Nationality: American  
Background: Graphic Design

**Nathan** identified himself as a surface design specialist. During the interview he displayed interest in engaging with a new craft process, and in learning more about local production.

**Mohammad** is interested in finding new opportunities within his field, and in creating visibility for his craft. In past work, Mohammad used graphic surface elements for decorative purposes, suggesting an alignment with Nathan's design specialization.

For 28 years, Mohammad has been creating glass perfume bottles, which are commonly found in Egyptian souks. He uses a specific skill set to blow glass into intricate and distinctive shapes. During his many years of experience, Mohammad has not varied the color, shape, size or patterns of his glass work, which features attributes passed down to him over many generations.

**The objective** of this particular collaboration is to create a new line of products by designing new collections or redesigning existing ones. Additionally, it seeks to explore the potential of using surface and form to generate meaning—specifically within the context of an artisan-designer collaboration in Qatar.

Figure 13: Glass perfume bottles made by Mohammad Antar

Figure 14: Mohammad Antar working in his workshop



## Mohammad Al Taher + Jennyfer Marie Davis:



**Mohammad Al Taher**  
Nationality: Yemeni  
Nature of Craft: Gypsum engraving



**Jennyfer Marie Davis**  
Nationality: American  
Background: Interior Design

**Jennifer** is interested in identifying new markets. She describes herself as an expert of space, color, texture, lighting, and interior styling.

**Mohammad's** work deals primarily with light and he is interested in creating visibility for his craft in Qatar. For twenty years, Mohammad has been creating one single family of artifacts, *Qamariya*: decorative Yemeni lamps made of carved plaster, containing geometric patterns of stained glass. Neither Mohammad, nor the generations of plaster artisans preceding him, have previously felt the need to alter the shape or function of these lamps.

**The objective** of this particular collaboration is to create a new line of products by designing new collections, or redesigning existing ones, applying traditional skills and processes. Additionally, this collaboration explores the potential to make a new lantern, with new form and application, possibly incorporating a modular approach, to extend its possible applications—specifically within the context of an artisan-designer collaboration in Qatar.

Figure 15: Qamariya: decorative Yemeni lamps made by Mohammad Al Taher

Figure 16: Mohammad Al Taher working in his workshop



## Sameh Farag + Stella Colaleo:



**Sameh Farag**  
Nationality: Egyptian  
Nature of Craft: Pottery



**Stella Colaleo**  
Nationality: Italian  
Background: Architecture

**Stella** is interested in designing for new craft processes, and possesses a history of collaborative, multi-disciplinary projects. She has knowledge about the marketability of local products, gained from previous work experience.

**Sameh** has interest in creating new product lines, within the current market, and in finding new market opportunities. Sameh has been reproducing clay coffee mugs, among other pottery artifacts, for thirty-two years, using wheel-throwing and carving techniques. In his workshop/ store, Sameh displays over 1,000 identically handmade coffee mugs. The only hint of modernization is the inscription of names, carved into the mugs.

**The objective** of this particular collaboration is to create visibility for the pottery craft in Qatar by designing new products or redesigning existing ones, using traditional processes. Additionally, this collaboration seeks to create functional objects that address the current market need—specifically within the context of an artisan-designer collaboration in Qatar.



Figure 17: clay coffee mugs made by Sameh Faraj

Figure 18: Sameh Faraj working in his workshop

## The Handbook

Each designer received a handbook, tailored to each collaboration, and then each pair of collaborators attended an initiation meeting.

The handbook:

- Introduced designers to the overall project
- Provided background information about the collaborating artisan
- Contained a project development structure, designed to generate a project brief
- Established deadlines

Appendix 2 contains the handbook.

Designers met with artisans, to learn more about them, to learn about their work processes and capabilities, and to generate a project brief for each collaboration, by populating project development structure forms—provided in the handbook—with data and responses.

Appendix 3 contains a completed project development structure form.

## Facilitation: meetings, processes, follow up, deadlines and documentation

Designers completed weekly reflective journal entries, responding to targeted questions. The journals ensured that designers reflect on their own weekly experiences, in order to assess and evaluate their own work, as they assessed different possibilities of development at each stage. The journals provided detailed information for the facilitator (the author of this thesis), establishing a record of exchanges and identifying issues. Additionally, by attending and translating during meetings, the facilitator maintained a comprehensive understanding of the relationship dynamics throughout the collaborations between artisans and designers.

Appendix 4 contains reflective journaling questions.

Finally, the facilitator shared an online drive with designers, to upload and store content throughout the process.

## Collaborative Process

For six weeks, artisans and designers collaborated while meeting at the artisans' shops in the Souq. The collaborative process and project methodology varied, but project phases were as follows:

- Nathan Davis + Mohammad Antar: ideation, prototyping, final outcome
- Jennifer Lastname + Mohammad Al Taher: ideation, iteration, prototyping, final outcome
- Stella Colaleo + Sameh Farag: ideation, prototyping, iteration, prototyping, refining, final outcome

Differences depended on how designers and artisans approached the collaboration, and also on the willingness and flexibility of participants to alter and adapt normal working methods, in order to accommodate project outcomes and others' expectations.

The following pages illustrates the collaborative process of each project:



**Mohamad & Nathan**

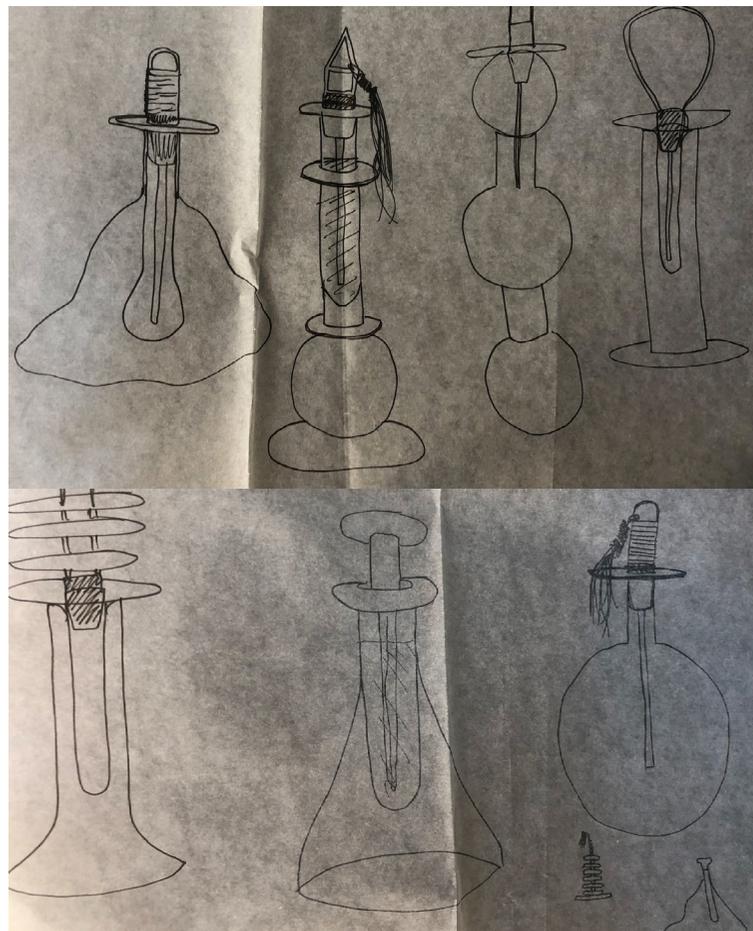


Figure 19: Perfume bottles sketches by Nathan Davis

Figure 20: Collaborative process between Mohammad and Nathan







Mohamed & Jennifer

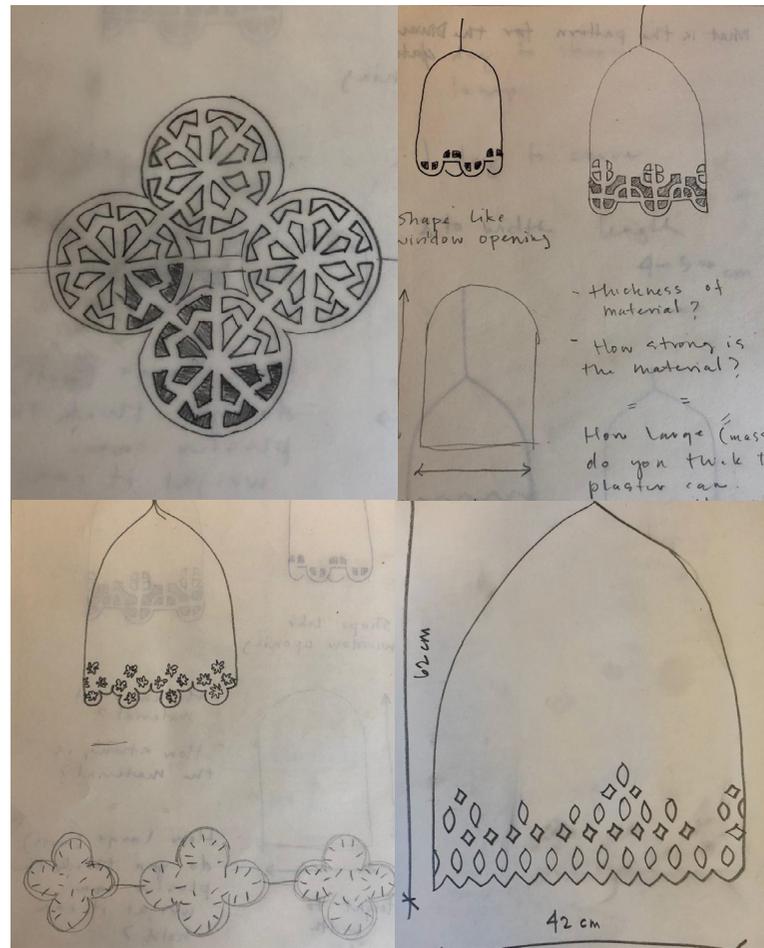
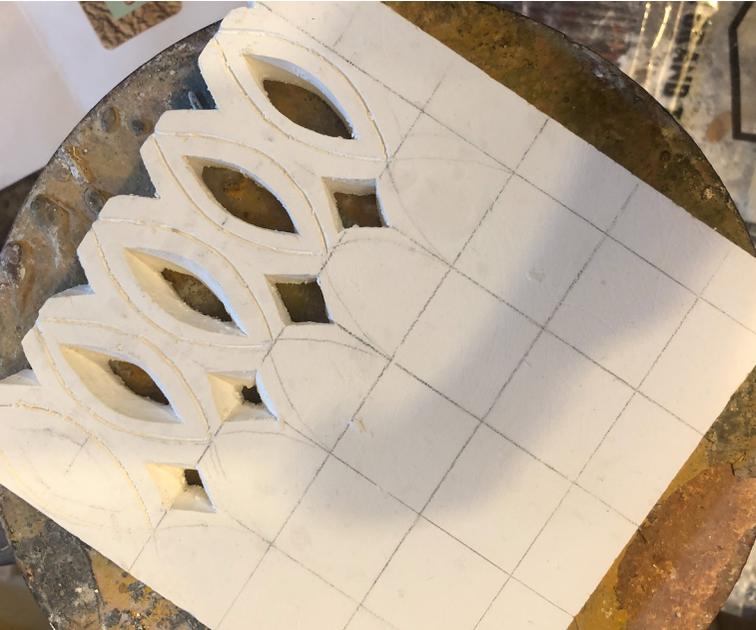


Figure 21: Hanging lamp sketches by Jennifer Marie Davis

Figure 22: Collaborative process between Mohammad and Jennifer







Sameh & Stella

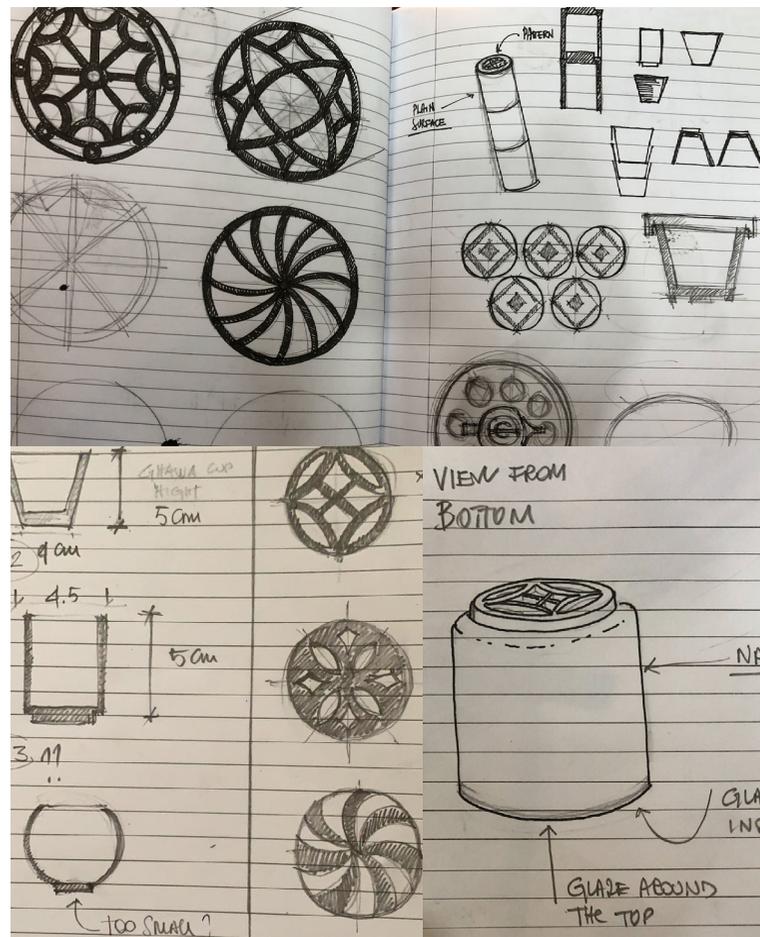
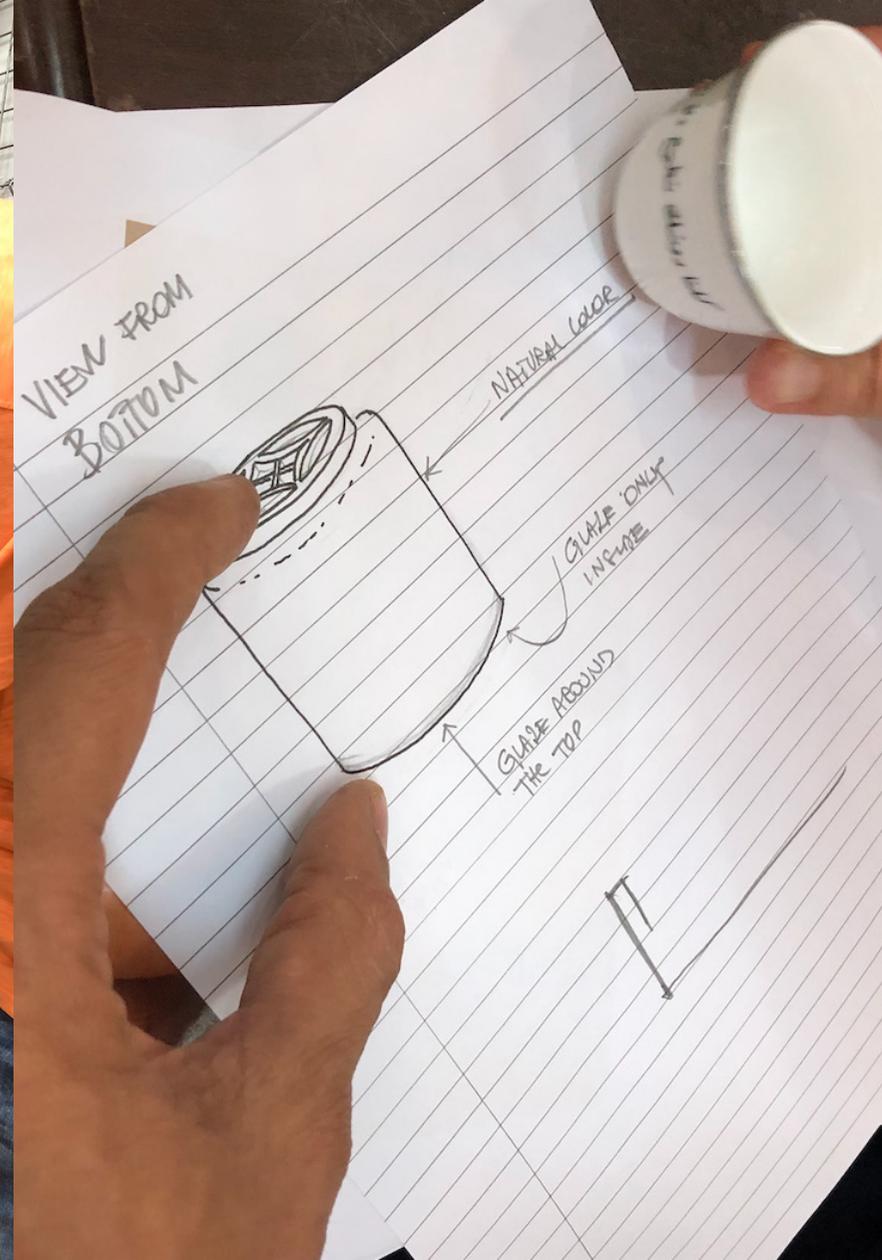


Figure 23: Fenjans sketches by Stella Colaleo

Figure 24: Collaborative process between Sameh and Stella





### Product Prototypes

After six weeks of work, participants partnered effectively to produce final product prototypes. Product prototypes are arguably 100% Qatari Products: inspired by the local culture, made using traditional, local know-how, and informed by collaboration between artisans and designers working together, within the local context of Qatar. They include:



**Mohamed & Nathan**

A contemporary series of glass perfume bottles, responding to the local affinity for high end perfume. The form of the handblown glass bottles showcases the honesty and beauty of the material itself, while introducing a new visual language, distinctive within the Qatari marketplace.

Figure 25: Perfume bottle prototypes achieved through collaborative process, photo credit Nathan Davis





**Mohamed & Jennifer**

A hanging lamp, made of plaster, inspired by *Qamariya*—the regional traditional craft of carved architectural plaster. The design respects the material craft traditions, while adapting to current aesthetic trends.



Figure 26: Hanging plaster lamp prototype achieved through collaborative process





**Sameh & Stella**

A clay coffee set, oriented toward the prevalent local coffee culture, where offering coffee is a routine gesture of hospitality. Designed to be displayed on the table, always ready for use, these small *Fenjans* have a carved pattern designed into the bottom of each cup. Stored upside down on the tray, the exposed traditional Arabic pattern greets visitors when not in use. Later, after the cups have been drained, the offset ringed pattern allows the interlocking cups to stack neatly.



Figure 27: Clay coffee set prototype achieved through collaborative process



### Interpersonal Process:

The three collaborations produced successful tangible outcomes, despite suffering from interpersonal challenges. An explicit goal of the research process is to identify and document aspects surrounding the ways artisans and designers approach collaboration in the specific context of Qatar.

### Designers' Perspective and Feedback

The weekly reflective journal and direct observations recorded positive comments, and also frustration. Designers expressed excitement about the collaborative process and its potential to:

- Help them build a network
- Spend time exploring local culture and craft making
- Explore new market opportunities
- Expand their design thinking and modes of design communication
- Learn new ways to explain design ideas and values

Designers also experienced frustrations during the collaborative process, due, in some cases, to poor communication between participants, or a loss of interest. Concerns listed in the reflective journals:

- Language barriers
- Unequal contributions of project participants

- Felt like a commission rather than collaboration
- Unclear scope, project value and participatory roles

### Artisans' Perspective and Feedback

Direct observations and constant feedback from the artisans produced many positive reflections and a few complaints. Throughout the collaborative process, some artisans were very keen to share knowledge, accommodate the designer, and address project needs. Others were uncomfortable and less collaborative.

Artisans were excited to:

- Expand their product lines
- Contribute technical and market insights
- Engage with local designers
- Experience new processes and tools
- Learn new modes of design communication

Artisans also articulated complaints and concerns:

- Designers ignored their design recommendations
- Felt treated like skilled labor, not equal collaborators
- Misunderstood that the product would be proposed by the designer, and subsequently lost interest
- Concerned about being asked to alter their traditional working processes

### Findings

Limitations impacting collaborations in Qatar are clearly related to traditional perceptions about the roles played by artisans and designers. Designers and artisans in Qatar, due to social, environmental and political conditions, are accustomed to a vertical arrangement, with artisans positioned lower in the hierarchy and often treated as skilled labor, rather than being seen as equal contributors.

The experience showed that designers entered into the collaboration with pre-conceived ideas about the artisans' limitations, as expressed by one designer: "I hesitate to push him to refine the work, because in some ways, I don't think that he can.... Precision and quality aren't really the values that shape his work." Designers tend to consider themselves "the brains" of the process, and undervalue the conceptual input of artisans. According to one designer, speaking about design credit: "... it seems that he had a few orders for one of the designs. I didn't know that he would go ahead and do that, and really since they are 'my designs' we should have a conversation first."

Subsequent discussion with the designer, interrogating his view of his position in the process pyramid or "hierarchy" reveals a vertical view of the process. As affirmed in a quote from the journal: "Language is a huge barrier, his interest in actual collaboration seems limited, it isn't totally clear if I'm working for him or if he is working for me, or if we are both working for Asma."

Two artisans reported that they liked the designers' concepts and that they would not have arrived at similar ideas themselves. This indicates that they have been conditioned to ignore their own creative potential, and have become acclimated to their traditional roles as executors, without engaging in new challenges independently.

Social hierarchy, power dynamics and unconscious bias clearly impacted each project. The next stage of thesis research intentionally challenged and addressed these factors, in order to positively impact the infrastructure of interpersonal relations between designers and artisans, to produce more healthy, productive, and mutually satisfying collaborations.

## THESIS OUTCOMES

### Parametric Pray

Findings collected from the research investigations, described above, paved the way for a next collaboration. This next project, from the start, built a collaborative experience on a foundation of equality between participants, taking steps to incorporate the artisan's input and feedback during product conception, development and execution.



**Asma Derouiche**  
Nationality: Tunisian  
Background: Product Design



**Haytham Rassam**  
Nationality: Yemeni  
Nature of Craft: Leather

**Asma** is a product designer whose previous work combines analog and digital modes of making. She is interested in engaging more meaningfully with the local culture of craft production.

**Haytham** is a leather worker, whose work consists of traditional artifacts. He is interested in celebrating and preserving Qatari heritage.

### Collaborative Process

The basis for a successful collaboration was a strong interpersonal relationship, and mutual trust, gained through frequent interactions between participants. Initially, the artisan expressed discomfort with the idea of working on new products. It took six months of visits to the souq, interviews and discussions to develop a change of perspective, which—when it occurred—happened suddenly and unexpectedly.

Ultimately, the artisan grew interested in an idea proposed by the designer, to produce a leather prayer rug. What was meant to be a short conversation grew into a four-hour meeting. The change of heart came when the designer showed the artisan a picture of a triangular pattern, sewn into leather. An in-depth discussion followed, imagining ways of adapting the technique to serve a utilitarian function.

During the exchange, in real time, the artisan explored possibilities, generating technical experiments and sample prototypes, making informed suggestions to the designer for next steps. The initial proposal, for a triangular pattern where the head and knees touch the rug during prayer, grew and evolved, through mutual agreement, to envision a whole-rug pattern, with padding sewn into the space between layers, for comfort.

The artisan suggested that the designer should develop the triangular pattern digitally, in order to have more control, and to avoid a randomly placed motif. This suggestion led to a

parametric pattern, drawn by the designer, and printed on paper, to form a template, which the artisan then transferred onto the rug through stitching. While the artisan sewed the leather of the upper and lower parts of the rug together, the designer and artisan both worked to gradually fill the pockets with stuffing, ensuring that the result would be satisfactory from both an ergonomic and aesthetic perspective.

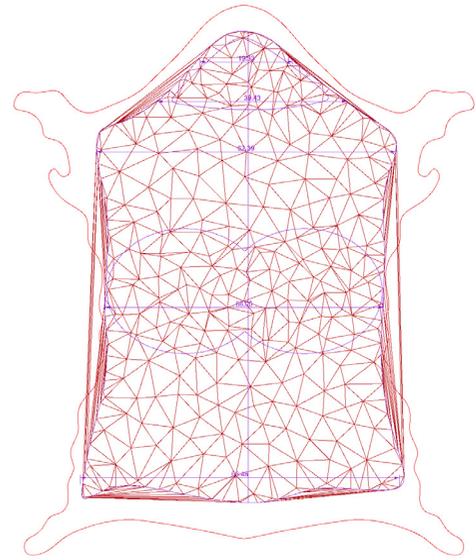


Figure 28: Parametric pattern designed by Asma Derouiche based on feedback from Haytham Rassam



Figure 29: Collaborative process between Asma and Haytham



## Finished Product

Parametric Pray is a one-of-a-kind leather prayer rug, the result of collaborative efforts between a leather artisan and a product designer, working together in the specific context of Qatar. The collaborative structure relied on the following principles:

- The artisan is an equal contributor
- A patiently developed interpersonal relationship is key
- Exchange of new knowledge benefits both artisans and designers
- All parties gain know-how

The project demonstrates that it is possible to introduce variety to the existing framework of, "100% Qatari Products," by pairing the creativity and know-how of artisans and designers from heterogenous backgrounds. The project challenges traditional expectations for what an authentic Qatari artifact should be—and look like—reflecting a new, emerging society, embracing a new identity, and expanding traditional notions of authenticity—a demonstration of New Authentic.



Figure 30: Parametric Pray, finished product achieved through equal collaborative process

## SILLA

To challenge the power dynamics, social hierarchy and unconscious bias that undermine collaborations between artisans and designers working in Qatar, it is necessary to redefine the existing dichotomy defining their respective roles.

A second thesis research outcome, *SILLA*, is an ideation game, designed to enable and facilitate equal collaborations between artisans and designers, with careful attention to the specific collaborative conditions encountered in Qatar. The object of the game is to come up with the most innovative, hybridized and authentic descriptions of never-before-seen Qatari artifacts. These criteria—innovative, and hybridized—inform the new definition of authenticity, in the context of Qatar.

*SILLA* is an Arabic word that means, “connection.” It comes from the Arabic root *asl*, which means, “authentic,” or, “original.” The game produces ideas for artifacts that are **innovative**, because ideas emerge from new design methods of non-linear thinking and contextualized interactions. The game produces ideas for artifacts defined by **hybridization**, because of the inherent heterogeneity of participants’ methods, cultures and backgrounds. Finally, the game produces ideas for artifacts with inherent “**Qatariness**,” because it reinforces Qatar’s cultural traditions, behaviors, heterogeneous communities and emergent modernity.



Figure 31: *SILLA*, ideation game

*SILLA* is inspired by the award-winning game *The Thing From The Future*, by Situation Lab, who describes it as, “...an imagination game that challenges players to collaboratively and competitively describe objects from a range of alternative futures.”<sup>20</sup> *SILLA* includes aspects of *The Thing From The Future*; for example, it is collaborative and leads players to generate ideas for new imaginary objects. In order to ensure inclusive participation from all players (designers and artisans), *SILLA* includes card categories designed to introduce participants to one another, to allow everyone to identify their respective skills and promote engaging game play. The ultimate goal is to generate multiple combinations of ideas for hybridized artifacts that benefit from the experience and insight of a diverse collection of players.

*SILLA* shares categories in common with *The Things From The Future*, such as Object, Mood and Terrain, but the content of cards in these categories has been adapted to suit the local Qatari context. *SILLA* contains new categories as well: Material and Purpose. The Material category overtly involves artisan players, inviting direct connections between game play (which is truly design ideation) and their practice-based knowledge. The Purpose category helps players define functionality, leading to more accessible and inclusive discussion, involving all participants and steering away from overly abstract or purely conceptual outcomes. During every round of Game-storming, players draw cards from a deck, to collectively generate a creative prompt. This prompt describes the kind of **object** to be designed,



Figure 32: *SILLA*, Card Categories

Figure 33: *SILLA*, Idea sheet

suggests the **mood** (emotional reaction) it might trigger in the user, specifies its **material**, defines its **terrain** (its physical or conceptual context) and identifies its **purpose**.

Afterward, every player writes or draws a short description of an artifact that fits the constraints of the prompt. Then, a group discussion takes place about these ideas (without attribution), and the group scores the ideas according to the criteria of innovation, hybridization and "Qatariness." Next, players choose their favorite ideas by adding their names to the description sheet containing each idea. At the end of the game, the list of names on each description sheet generates pairings or groups who are invited to collaborate and develop the project.

Because the game is a group activity, all participants contribute to the ideation process, and they also build appreciation, trust, curiosity and awareness of the skills and sensibilities of other participants.

SILLA is available to print and play through this link: [http://tiny.cc/SILLA\\_Print-and-Play](http://tiny.cc/SILLA_Print-and-Play)

**Scoring Sheet**

ورقة التهديف

Serial number	Innovative مبتكر /50	Hybridized متنوع /30	Qatari قطري /20	New criterion معياري جديد	Total المجموع /100

Figure 34: SILLA, scoring sheet

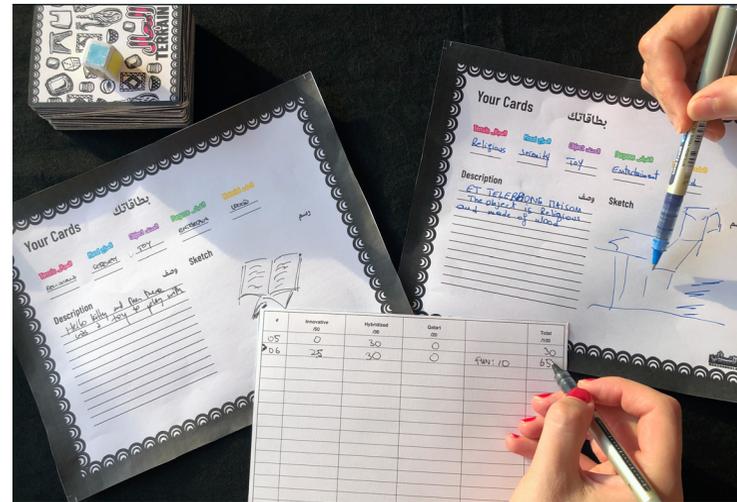


Figure 35: Playing SILLA



## The Workshop

An interactive and experimental workshop tested SILLA and its ability to establish the basis for more equal collaborations. The game itself encompassed many goals: breaking (flattening) hierarchy, deconstructing dichotomies, dissolving barriers, creating relationships and building trust between participants. To test its effectiveness, the workshop prioritized the following aims:

- Foster genuine collaboration among heterogeneous participants
- Initiate debate and discussion around core ideas of innovation, hybridization and “Qatariness”
- Facilitate idea-driven collaboration

Six designers from VCUarts Qatar and four artisans from Souq Waqif attended the workshop. To start the session, participants learned about the project and its objectives. The workshop proceeded as follows:

- Participants formed mixed groups
- The facilitator explained the game’s instructions
- Participants played, mixing and matching groups through three rounds
- Participants discussed ideas generated by the

- The facilitator assisted with scoring and selecting the winning ideas
- The group arrived at consensus and adopted projects

Because project rules and principles were established as a first step, participants entered this exchange with defined expectations about collaboration. The game’s premise and structure defined the collaboratory role of each participant, obviating concerns about ownership and credit.

Even though *SILLA* brought clear structure to the workshop, it also allowed space for willing participants to reframe the conversation intuitively and spontaneously. In fact, due to the reflective and dialogic nature of the game, during one session, participants stepped outside the game itself and contributed interesting questions and valuable suggestions to improve future workshops. The activity fostered general enthusiasm and a creative, relaxed atmosphere, which led to excitement about—and willingness to participate in—more than one project.

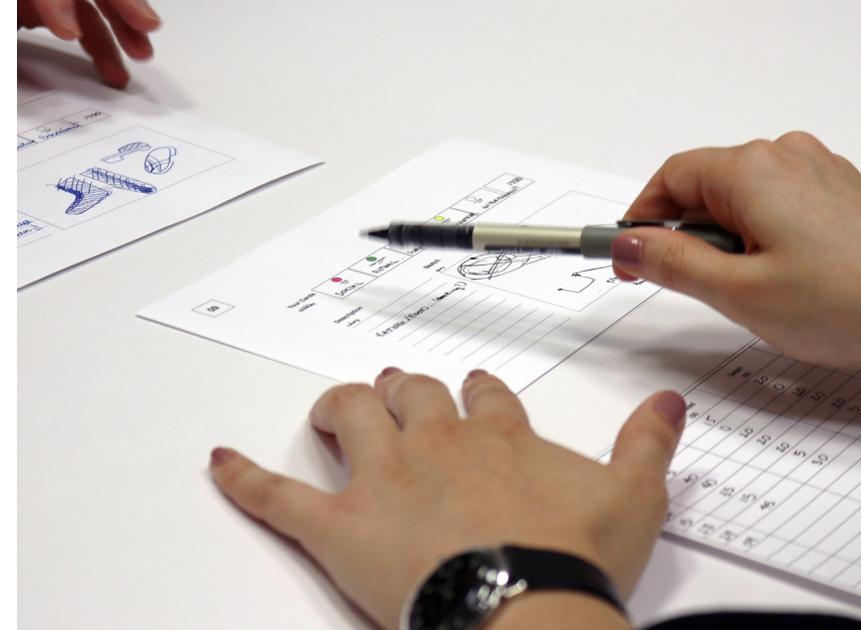
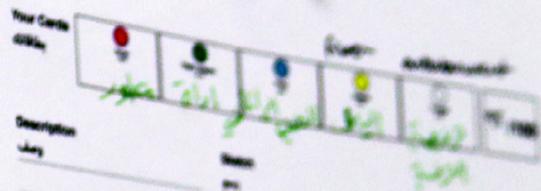


Figure 36: Experimental interactive workshop to test *SILLA*

PRINCESS /100



29

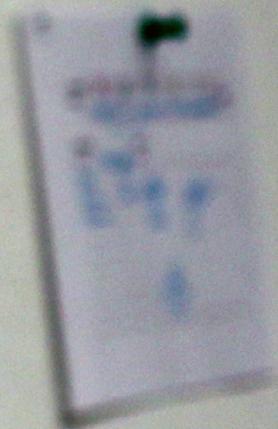


قوزان القهوة هذا القطار  
الوالدات يعملون الكمبيوتر  
مكتوب على يد الفاعل  
بمساكنة

Haytham هيثم

Sarah سارة

Yahia يحيى



## Workshop Outcomes

The session generated multiple project proposals. Idea descriptions with the highest scores—according to the criteria of innovation, hybridization and “Qatariness”—collected names and contact details of participants interested in collaborating to move the projects forward. Project briefs and a methodology outline for two representative examples follow:

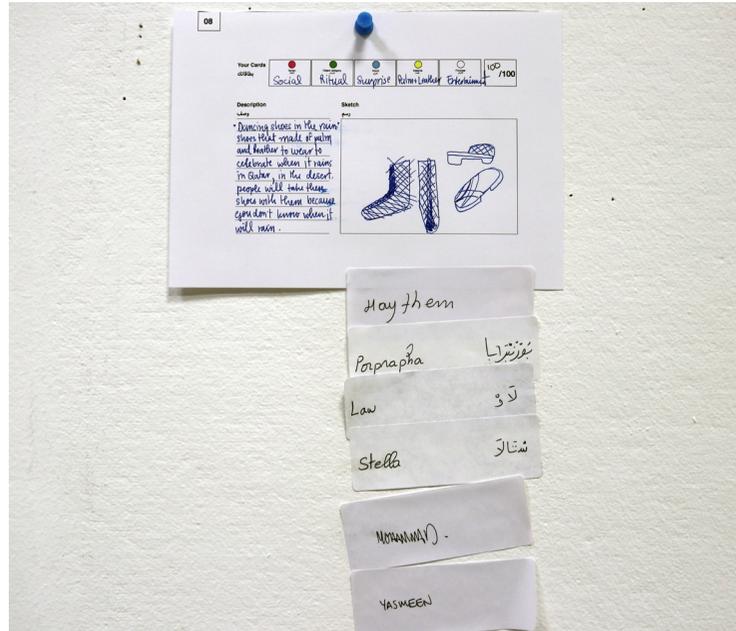


Figure 37: Sample idea and paired team members generated through experimental interactive workshop

## Rain Shoes

**Task:** To take advantage of and celebrate the infrequent periods of rain during Qatar's rainy season.

**Design:** A single use pair of unisex shoes produced from palm leaves and leather that contain date seeds to be released during their wearing (and eventual breakdown).

**Purpose:** To instigate a ritual celebration during the appearance of rain in Qatar wherein the user replaces their shoes with these in order to perform a dance that destroys the shoe but releases the date seed into the ground. The shoe material serves as the initial fertilizer for the young date tree when they are planted in the ground.



Figure 38: Rain shoes project proposal developed by the paired team





Figure 39: Sample idea and paired team members generated through experimental interactive workshop

as an accessory, styled for both genders. The Khoro-Kiss uses contrasting materials; brass and ceramic that interact with each other through friction and impact in order to engage the wearer with altered sensations of touch and close contact. The choice of materials is also important for their ease of cleaning and sanitization.

#### Methodologies:

1. Concept Development
2. Design Development - look and feel
  - a. Sketches
  - b. Precedents
3. Materials and production Study - meeting with the artisans
4. Finalize design direction
5. Prototype
6. Production

#### Khoro-Kiss

##### Brief

The Khoro-Kiss is a greeting device intended to replace traditional nose-to-nose and cheek-to-cheek kissing. During the Coronavirus outbreak, people are advised not to greet each other physically, including the traditional cheek and nose greetings, to avoid the risk of catching and spreading the coronavirus. This device is designed to be worn on the wrist

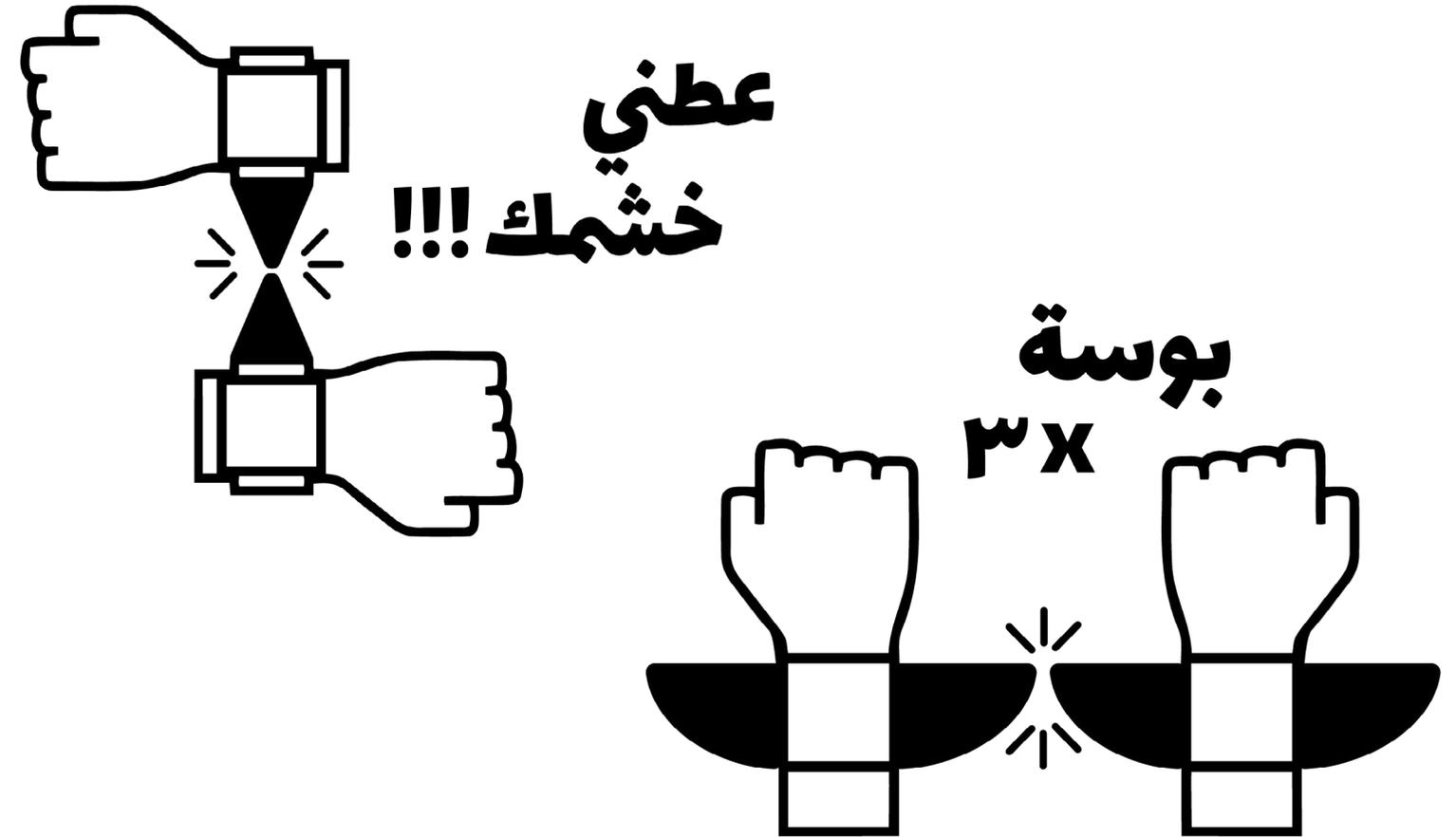


Figure 40: Khoro-kiss Project proposal developed by the paired team

## CONCLUSION

Qatar's emergent cultural context—defined by prosperity in a climate of unique heterogeneity and diversity—supports a new experience of authenticity. This New Authenticity is forward-looking and open, resistant to the traditional, static, inherited views that impose limitations on collaborators and collaboration. New Authenticity fosters innovative, hybridized, and authentically Qatari cultural production.

This thesis research highlights and celebrates what can happen when designers and artisans contribute equally, in an era of New Authenticity. First, the literature review defines various existing dimensions of authenticity, and then proceeds to reflect on the application of these various dimensions within a rapidly modernized Arab culture. Next, the research defines limitations, capabilities, and opportunities currently impacting collaborations between artisans and designers in the specific context of Qatar.

In the Investigations section, three project trials pair artisans from Souq Waqif with designers from VCUarts Qatar. To explore and document challenges and opportunities of working in a collaborative and interpersonal process, these strategic partnerships collaborate on projects tied to overlapping interests and objectives. The trials identify limitations caused by social hierarchy, power dynamics and unconscious bias. In the Outcomes section, the research applies innovative collaborative methods to address challenges experienced

during the Investigation trials, in order to foster a genuine, jointly owned, idea-driven collaboration. Parametric Pray demonstrates the benefit of breaking (flattening) hierarchy, deconstructing dichotomies, dissolving barriers and creating relationships based on mutual trust. Next, a participatory collaborative design method (*SILLA*), proposes new methods for producing “100% Qatari Products.” Finally, an interactive workshop attended by artisans and designers practicing in Qatar tests the ideation card game—*SILLA*—in real time, generating jointly-authored, original, authentically Qatari project proposals with collaborative buy-in and enthusiasm.

This thesis actively resists and challenges hierarchical conventions inhibiting collaboration in Qatar. Declaring an era of New Authenticity, this body of work gives more autonomy and creative freedom to artisans, creatively addressing obstacles engendered by the hegemonic Kafala system. It demonstrates how all participants benefit from challenging and resisting barriers imposed by strict traditionalists. By igniting a two-way flow of creative innovation—between open-minded designers and adventurous artisans—the research envisions a means to empower marginalized factions of Qatari society, engaging them to bridge social gaps and pursue greater prosperity. The quest for a New Authentic offers benefits for all.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I initiated this research, my primary goal was to help underprivileged artisans I had met in the souq. As an expat designer, with access to the best design training and education in the country, I viewed myself as privileged. I was not yet aware of the extent of my own biases at that moment. The working title for my research, at the beginning, was, "Leveraging Craft by Design." I thought, from my position as a designer, I would be able to empower people by creating work opportunities for them. I now can see how my own preconceived ideas, at the start, contained limiting stereotypes.

Over the evolving course of the research, my perspective has changed. I no longer think it is about leveraging craft—which I originally considered the most powerful source of potential. Over time, my focus shifted toward the need to address the underlying social dynamics, in order to establish new dialog, to support cultural production in Qatar. The human aspects—mutual understanding, mutually-beneficial collaboration based on equality—emerged as essential.

I believe in the authenticity of this experience, because it genuinely changed my own views. The depth and duration of the process allowed me to have strong, sustained interactions with different people, in a variety of settings. Also, because the process was experimental, it developed its own authentic aspect. I set out to help the artisans, but ultimately, they helped me. They taught me to understand complexities embedded in current conditions, locally, which led me to

restructure my research approach. I realized that as long as I approached the research with my initial biases—ignorant about existing power dynamics—I would only reiterate and reinforce them, rather than doing anything capable of having long-term impact.

I recently returned to visit Sameh. I was delighted and surprised to find a clear and direct evolution in his work, following his collaboration with Stella. Sameh is experimenting with shifts in the visual language of his products and creating new lines for sale in his shop, thanks to this experience.



Figure 41: Sameh's New Pottery

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This project has already facilitated successful and meaningful collaboration between artisans and designers in Qatar. Evidence confirms ongoing willingness of participants to continue collaborating in the future. The research continues to generate positive impact for participants. For instance, Sameh the ceramist—who used to work solely in a repetitive fashion that did not demand great attention to quality of finish—has evolved his own practice, following his collaboration with Stella, and has started exploring new ceramic shapes and functions, using new tools to smooth and shape the surfaces of his products, and glazing them with greater attention to detail.

A primary future objective of this research is to establish a platform for connecting makers and designers in Qatar, to facilitate the free flow of ideas and knowledge.

My role, as the founder of this initiative, will be to act as a social entrepreneur, able to catalyze unexpected, unprecedented, and unusual encounters by mixing diverse groups of people and translating across cultural, economic and disciplinary boundaries. I will create structured events designed to combine social impact and business opportunity within Qatar's cultural ecosystem. By offering improved methods to foster mutual respect, learning and understanding, the platform would create interactive workshops using strategies like SILLA.

This platform would create a safe space to examine infinite creative possibilities, and to nurture the growth of Qatari cultural production in pursuit of a New Authentic.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1: Interviews with Artisans

#### Craftsman experience:

- Describe yourself
  - What's your name?
  - Where are you from?
  - How did you learn these skills?
  - How did you start working as a \_\_\_\_\_ craftsman?
  - Was this a family trade you learned from your father?
  - How did you end up practicing this in Qatar?
- What was your experience working in your home country?
- Is it different from your experience working here in Qatar?
  - If so, how?

#### Handicraft in Qatar:

- According to your own experience what do you think "Made in Qatar" means?
- Can you describe the material you are working with?
  - Where do you get it?
  - Is it make locally?
  - Is it easy to get?

Who provides you with the materials?

- Are there any differences between doing your craft here in Qatar and back in your home country?
  - What is the difference in the material from your home country and here?
- Has your work changed since you began working here?
  - If so, how has it changed?
  - How do you see this change?
- What do you think Qatar adds to your business and your professional experience?

#### Design decisions:

- Do you choose the design of each piece before you start?
  - Does someone else chose the design for you?
  - Do you repeat the same design?
  - Do you produce multiples of different designs?
- Do you choose the design elements including: color, the pattern, form, size, etc?
  - If so, is it according to a specific market need?
  - If not, are you told what these elements will be?
- Do the products have the same design that you

used to do in your country?

- Have the designs changed or been adapted (by you or someone else) for the local context?

#### Sponsor and social conditions:

- Who is your sponsor?
- Are there limitations imposed by your sponsor that affect your working condition?  
If so, what are these limitations?
- Are you renting the shop you are currently working in?
- Do you have any other income other than your business in the Souq?
- Are you allowed to produce work and display it somewhere else other than the Souq?  
If yes, what are previous work you have done in this context?

#### Previous Collaborations:

- Have you previously participated to collaborative projects?  
If yes, what were these projects and what was your contribution to them?

- Have you previously collaborated with designers?  
If yes, what was the project and what do you think about the collaboration?
- Are you interested in collaborating with designers in Qatar through different projects?  
If yes, how do you see this collaboration happening?

## Appendix 2: The Handbook

### Reconsidering the authentic cultural Qatari product through a collaborative exchange of knowledge between artisans and designers

The collaboration Handbook

Asma Derouiche  
VCUarts Qatar  
Fall 2019

#### General statement:

In recent decades Qatar has undergone a significant transformation due to rapid modernization. This has had a significant impact on national cultural heritage. In an effort to maintain and preserve a national identity and build a contemporary Qatari heritage, a number of institutions, including Qatar Museums and Souq Waqif, have developed various programs for producing and displaying authentic cultural artifacts to convey Qatari pride.

These artifacts are emblematic of the Qatari cultural identity and are proposed as "100% Qatari product". However, neither the workers (artisans) or the materials are locally sourced. The large and pervasive expat community can, at times, have pre-conceived ideas of what Qatari heritage 'should' look like. These assumptions are based on artificiality and the use of symbolic stereotypes in the Gulf region. Expats, themselves, equally contribute to the formation of this contemporary cultural identity through their participation in the cosmopolitan and heterogeneous state and culture.

This project seeks to explore a new or alternative authentic cultural artifact in Qatar. "100% Qatari product[s]" are "authentic" due, in large part, to socially constructed concepts according to specific contexts. This project will highlight and celebrate the diversity of the Qatari products wherein both designers and artisans contribute to its diversity.

During this phase of the project, local artisans are paired with local designers through strategic partnerships in order to develop new collaborative projects in Qatar. The objective is to enhance artifact production through the collaborative knowledge exchange between designers and artisans.

#### Statement of the collaboration :

The objective of this particular collaboration is to create a new line of products by designing new collections or redesigning existent ones. Additionally, it seeks to explore the potential of using surface and form to generate and build meaning - specifically within the context of an artisan-designer collaboration in Qatar.





**Mohammad Antar**  
 Nationality: Egypt  
 Workshop address: Souq Waqif  
 Nature of Craft: Glass fusing/blowing  
 Sponsor: PEO

Mohammed Antar has been doing artistic glass work for 28 years. The craft was passed down to him through generations of this family. He previously worked in Egypt where glass-work is a popular craft.

Mohammed came to Doha 7 years ago to do the same work in Souq Waqif and is currently sponsored by the Private Engineering Office (PEO) who runs the souq. He rents a shop in the souq where he works and displays his products. Mohammed makes his living from his sales.

His designs are inspired by the local, traditional lifestyle and the Arab-Islamic culture. He tries to translate that through the function, pattern and shapes of the product. Mohammed wishes to commercialize his work and make more sales.



### Data Sheet

**Name:** Mohammed Antar

**Years of experience:** 28 years

**Initial training:** Inherited from family

**Objects made:** Souvenirs, perfume products, tea and coffee sets.

**Raw material used:** Glass imported from Egypt

**Type of product:** Traditional  Modern   
 Functional  Artistic

**Activity:** Seasonal  November & December  
 Part time  From 4pm to 10pm  
 Full time

**Professional help:** Apprentices   
 Employees  One person who looks after the shop

**Design decisions::** Personal   
 Imposed

**Material's choice:** Only glass because of the nature of the craft.  
 Never tried hybridizing materials in the final product.

**Past collaborations:** Glass blown water bottles for Noora (MFA Alumni), displayed during her exhibition

**Selling methods:** All the products are displayed in the shop, there are no other sales points

**Type of customers:** Local   
 Foreign   
 Direct sale   
 Intermediary



### Frame and scope of the project:

#### Objectives:

For Mohammed:

- Preserve a heritage and a way of life
- Create new product lines within the current market and new market opportunities.

For Nathan:

- Learn glass working skills
- Learn about the local glass industry
- Expand knowledge and engagement with local culture

#### Brief / General frame:

Surface + Form to develop and build meaning

#### Forms of potential design intervention:

- Design new products
- Redesign existant products with changes in shape, size, color, function and utility.
- Apply traditional skills to meet new opportunities and challenges.

#### Examples:

Functional products that have graphic elements



Decorative products that have graphic elements



#### Key project dates:

Project development, Submission: October 20  
 Final product, Submission: November 25

#### Important Notes:

• Reflective Journaling - at the end of each week, please fill out the Reflective Journal Template available on the shared Drive folder

• Project Scale - For the sake of this research phase and the necessary deadlines, it's important to keep the scope of the project and the outcomes (product) small scale. These could potentially be further realized in a subsequent phase

• Final Products - You have the choice to purchase the product in case you want to keep it with you. Please note that I'll need the product for the final exhibition.

**Project development :** (By Nathan)

**Brief:**

#### Methodology:

**Type and process of documentation:**

**Timeline:**

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1cBVoaXkL3\\_caa1We-U82nDUNu2cTMchJSM9THkHplk/edit#gid=329575242](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1cBVoaXkL3_caa1We-U82nDUNu2cTMchJSM9THkHplk/edit#gid=329575242)

## Appendix 3: Completed Project Development Structure Form.

### Brief:

Redesign an existing form in the shop in a contemporary style that targets a different market segment.

The object(s) should be easily produced/reproduced with material which is easily obtained.

The design should show the honesty and beauty of the material itself.

The design should avoid cliches, but maintain a local/regional style, which is on pace with global trends in glass design.

Establish a display method that both emphasizes the collaboration and the locally based craftsmanship of the objects.

Enhance the value of the craftsperson's process by bringing attention to the unique, culturally significant aspects of the design and craftsmanship of the object through documentation and storytelling.

### Methodology:

1 Meet with the artisan. Learn about the craft's limitations, materials, current sales, markets, the artisan's personal preferences, interests, hopes, and criteria for assessment.

2 Develop a brief that could yield several different outcomes, but that is thoughtfully considerate of constraints discovered in step one.

3 Collect images, make drawings, and visualize the final object design.

4 Present the design to the artisan, asking for feedback and making adjustments as necessary to make the design feasible.

5 Document the production of the prototype

6 Test the prototype, refine the design as necessary

7 Produce multiples, conduct a photo shoot of the product and make a dissemination plan

**Type and Process of Documentation:**

Photography, video, social media, note-taking, etc.

**Appendix 4: Reflective Journaling**

**Description:**

Factual account of what, how, and why you did it.  
(Methods, context, design decisions, etc...)

**Evaluation:**

What are modes of communication you utilized to convey your ideas?

What were the technical limitations posed by the artisan process and how did that inform the design decisions?

How was the artisan involved in the development of the design?

What unexpected issues occurred?

What would you have done differently?

What were the strengths and weaknesses of this collaborative process?

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