

Potential contribution of design in strengthening the regional identity in Southern Slovakia

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Abstract: The article deals with the phenomenon of the disappearance of cultural identities of regions in the Slovak Republic and presents potential design solutions and strategies that can positively influence the quality of public space, inspire and increase innovation in the region. The gradual loss of cultural identity is an unfortunate but an all-too-common reality in many regions of Slovakia. The studied regions of Hont and Novohrad are no exception: here the situation of regional awareness is even lower as a result of the historical development of the area. This is further evidenced by the frequently changing and fluid nature of the boundaries of these specific territorial units. This paper argues that regional identity is alive but constantly changes over a period of time. Identity is affected by various natural and social factors, including climate changes, population aging, and others. Nevertheless, the authenticity of the original culture is often suppressed at the expense of the aforementioned changes. Sadly, only a few regions are able to develop and maintain their traditional cultural heritage under these conditions. However, with the assistance of modern technologies, designers are able to use creative and systematic processes for the positive development of regional culture. This can be illustrated by various foreign organisations and projects such as the Werkraum Bregenzwald. The regions under investigation have a specific design language which is characterised by a unique morphology and material composition. Although, in order to reveal these signs and the very identity of the region, it is necessary to establish a contact with the local government, the local population and active cultural associations. The cooperation of interested parties in the form of participatory design is a key aspect in order to revive the existing elements of folk culture into a sustainable form with the character of local culture.

Keywords: region, cultural identity, traditional and folk crafts, Slovak regional design

INTRODUCTION

The design community believes that the traditional Slovak and folk culture is often limited to a few basic attributes within the consciousness and even the subconscious of the Slovak people. These attributes have become the identifiable and characteristic symbols of Slovakia, both in the regional and immediate international context. These symbolic elements have become generationally engrained symbols that are linked to specific natural elements, for example: the geomorphology of the country (the iconic Tatras mountain range), its folk architecture (such as the log houses in Čičmany), even the traditional gastronomy (dish *halušky*, restaurants *Salaš*) (Beňušková, 1998). However, Slovakia has a much greater cultural wealth that deserves greater recognition and celebration. Considering the geographical location of Slovakia, there could arguably more easily emerge colourful and internally diversified cultural regions. However, the identity of the tangible and intangible cultures of Central Europe is not clear-cut and thus, in many cases the identities are largely polarised. This phenomenon is noticeable both in the higher and lower territorial administrative units of countries such as macro and micro scale regions. The specific character of the culture of Slovakia's regions was primarily

influenced by the historical development of the given area, accompanied by the alternation of political regimes as well as the influence of various cultural ethnicities, whose presence caused the frequent transformation of state borders along with the consequent migrations (Kotradyová, Borysko, Lipková, Daniel, 2018).

With the intention of simplifying the implementation of the state administration, the area underwent a territorial-legal division which subsequently resulted in the creation of territorial units in the form of regions. However, this division did not always prove to be appropriate. There are regional and cultural overlaps in many territories. This creates a situation where the individual does not mentally identify with the area in which they are located, while the larger local population loses a sense of regional identity and belonging. This phenomenon is clearly manifested in the studied regions of Hont and Novohrad where, due to the frequent shifting of the southern border (until 1925 when the border with Hungary was definitively established), the Slovak and Hungarian nations were mixed into one population. Therefore, the southern areas of the regions are mostly made up of peoples and communities with a more pronounced Hungarian ethnicity. Similarly, many villages with Slovak ethnicity have

been preserved in the northern part of Hungary. In the area near the border, an alternation of juxtaposed Slovak and Hungarian municipalities can be observed (e.g. Pribelce, Hrušov – predominantly Slovak-speaking population, Čebovce, Kosihovce – predominantly Hungarian-speaking population). The mutual influence of the Slovak and Hungarian population of the given locality resulted in a similar, sometimes even identical way of life and cultural characteristics. Certain differences, though, are noticeable in folklore and artistic expressions (Beňušková, 1998).

According to the normative position of this author, the argument could be made as follows: Residents thus do not feel whether they are Slovak or Hungarian and, consequently, the regional awareness of Hont and Novohrad is low compared to the surrounding regions. Nevertheless, the investigated territory is a valuable source of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Its proper consideration and development through the creative activity of the designer can lead to the economic development of the regions. Numerous foreign organisations and projects illustrate this phenomenon. It is possible to use other functional methods of regional development, transform them and adapt them as needed. However, the process requires to follow up on an existing cultural heritage with development potential that the population identifies with and personally considers as part of its identity.

The article focuses primarily on the traditional folk culture of Slovakia and its regional contribution through creative activity. Specifically, this article concentrates on the regions of south Slovakia, like Hont and Novohrad. For this reason, it is necessary to define the term region. Although, the term region has several definitions. According to V. Lauko and O. Bašovský (1990), the region is *“a complex dynamic spatial system that arose on the earth's surface based on the interaction of natural and socio-economic phenomena.”* (Bašovský, Lauko, 1990, p. 118). In other words, a region is a geographically separated area of the state, which has been shaped into its current form by various geological, geopolitical and socio-cultural factors. As a result of these influences, a unique regional culture with a specific tangible and intangible heritage was created. Thus, the region has a unique cultural identity that shapes its material culture.

The regional culture as well as the identity of a particular part of the country evolves over time, it is not immutable and static. Its shapes are changing. It is a living entity influenced by various natural and social factors such as population aging, migration, representation of mineral resources, climate changes, changes in political regimes, modernisation and others. Changes are therefore natural in the given case and in many aspects necessary to maintain its viability. However, the mentioned factors can also work against the region and cause its degradation. Currently, it could be argued that there is a gradual disappearance of folk culture in many localities throughout Slovakia, despite its diversity and uniqueness. The regional awareness of the inhabitants as well as their identification with a specific place is disappearing. The diversity of the characteristics of individual regions is thus unknown to many, even though, these are usually values surrounding the society. This is a situation where even important cultural signs are overlooked, until finally they disappear. Currently, the trend of globalisation is also dangerous. Despite its positive intentions of global economic growth and international connectivity, with the aim of raising living standards and alleviating poverty, globalisation also has an adverse effect on the diminishing of cultural differences and obscuring the boundaries of regional identity (Kotradyová, Borysko, Lipková, Daniel, 2018).

It is the maintenance of regional specifics that ensures uniqueness and differentiation, which supports the economic and social development of the territory. Therefore, it is necessary to inform society about the importance of its existence in an adequate way. Various professional monographs were created in order to highlight and preserve the cultural values of some regions. For instance: Hont, Horehronie, Ľudové staviteľstvo na Kysuciach, Podzišovské Hrnčiarstvo and others. It is a complex processing of information obtained from various sources about the local specifics of the way of life. Important publications also include regional anthologies or professional journals (Beňušková, 1998). However, based on the current state of Slovak folk culture, it is clear that publications and local initiatives are not sufficient. This current degradation is also due to a gradually declining and disappearing older population, who are the owners of the cultural heritage. Additionally, there is a lack of interest and value placed on these traditions by young people since they do not see the future in the craft as a source of livelihood. Hence, regional cultures and traditions will gradually disappear. New possibilities arising from modern technologies lead to the emergence of new customs that suppress the authenticity of the original culture. The overall process of vanishing of folk culture is also accelerated by the current way of life, inappropriate approach, absence of creative processes and a lack of public initiatives.

ROLE OF DESIGN IN PRESERVING CULTURAL IDENTITY

The anticipated research builds on and continues with the ideas of the research APVV project ‘Identita SK’ (platform of design, architecture and social sciences). The aim of this project was to map the existing and living cultural heritage of various locations in Slovakia, while taking into account its potential for further development. The very result of the project consisted in building an extensive database of elements with a regional identity, from folk architecture to crafts, materials and their products. The mentioned research thus ensured the creation of various workshops, new design of products, concepts and educational studies, which will serve as examples of good practice in the given field and as sources of inspiration in the following course of research. The ongoing research endeavours to explore the possibilities of a much wider application of design in regional development and designing within an ecological, and even the social context. At the same time, this research aims at promoting various strategies and concepts to support new forms of tourism and other business in the regions, the creation of regional products and domestic production, as well as the development of new complex services (BCDlab, 2017).

Werkraum Bregenzerwald

An ideal example of the positive influence of design and creative activity in favour of regional development is the globally recognized association Werkraum Bregenzerwald (Fig. 1, 2). It is an association made up of several members representing various trades and crafts, such as carving, carpentry, metalworking, plumbing, upholstery, construction, shoemaking, goldsmithing, just to name a few. Some members are both product and graphic designers, and other members may even provide completely different services. The primary mandate of the association is to support the economic and cultural development of the region. This organisation strives for the sustainable development of crafts and trade through the preservation of and creation of new jobs, local production of sustainable products and their subsequent distribution, the preservation of quality crafts and the creation of intimate relationships through cooperation between craftsmen and designers. The programme also

involves the organisation of thematic exhibitions, workshops, competitions and lectures on crafts and local architecture as well as the presentation of products from the workshops of member companies. Many of the mentioned events take place in the common and multifunctional space of the Werkraum building which is located in the Austrian village of Andelsbuch. This space also serves as an exhibition space, shop and consulting centre (Grosse, 2019).

Educational programmes for children and youth are also an important part of the association's programme in terms of preserving the craft tradition and culture for future generations of the region. There are projects for all age groups – from kindergartens to various forms of higher education. One of the educational facilities is the Lädolar exhibition and mobile learning space. It is a portable container that serves to present individual crafts in the form of interactive portable boxes including tools, technologies and materials related to a specific craft. The Lädolar centre is under the supervision of craftsmen and workshop apprentices who provide varied and lively forms of presentation, school training in connection with individual employment together with questionnaires and information materials. They thus provide basic information about education and career prospects for future generations.



Fig. 1. Depot of Werkraum Bregenznerwald with the reception in the background. (Photo: Peter Daniel, 2018)



Fig. 2. Products of Werkraum Bregenznerwald with the reception in the background. (Photo: Peter Daniel, 2018)

Similar foreign projects

The Polish platform Design Silensia has the main goal to familiarise entrepreneurs, municipalities, the academic and scientific community with the topic of design and to support the implementation of innovations through design. This platform actively promotes design as an element of the transformation of the Silesian Voivodeship region. The first year of the Design Silesia project proved that the demand for design in the Silesian Voivodeship is growing and is an essential tool in building the region's innovations. The platform involved several field studies, publication activity, organising of exhibitions, conferences, educational courses and popularization events (Samorząd Województwa Śląskiego, 2012). The project Design Silesia lasted until 2013 and positively influenced the development of regional culture. The cooperation of various regional institutions contributed to the emergence of a new quality, both economic and social, which persists to this day.

The Sploty na fali project seeks to support the cooperation of basketmakers and students of the Academy of Fine Arts (Wydziałem Form Przemysłowych ASP) in Krakow, Poland, with the intention of reviving the traditional basket craft through design and designing of contemporary objects based on conventional techniques. The idea behind this strategy is to make the ancient techniques and products more attractive to a modern audience. Moreover, it is appropriate to mention the projects focused on the identity of Central European regions - Common Roots: Design Map of Central Europe and Central Values - Common Herit-

age in Contemporary Central European Design. The aim of the projects was to remove a possible connection between the creation of individuals as members of the entire European region and the mapping of a common cultural area (Kotradyová, Borysko, Lipková, Daniel, 2018). During three meetings, participants of the project got acquainted with materials such as cane, straw and wicker. Subsequently, based on traditional weaving techniques, they designed products for a new purpose and with the addition of non-standard materials (Zamek Cieszyn, 2017).

Examples of maintaining traditions in Slovakia

A few months after the end of the war production, in 1945 The People's and Art Centre (ÚĽUV) was founded directly through the decree of President Beneš. Since the establishment of the decree, national folk production has been under the control of the ÚĽUV. In February 1948, after coercive actions and subsequent elections, the communists took over the government in the state. In Czecho-Slovakia there was a period of the so-called of "people's democracy" under the rule of the Communist Party. The era of socialism subsequently gradually destroyed the economic system as well as the country's culture. At present, however, the political situation is different and ÚĽUV (The Centre for Folk Art Production) thus tries to preserve and develop folk culture in Slovakia through artistic activity, and this without significant problems.

The aim of the organisation is to document, protect and spread the knowledge of Slovak cultural identity in terms of preserving it for future generations. Among the main activities of ÚĽUV is the documentation of traditional crafts and folk products as well as the care of collections and documentation funds throughout Slovakia. The traditional folk craft of the society is introduced through publishing activities, organising exhibitions and festivals. An important space is also reserved for the workshops where individuals come into direct contact with the material and create products based on traditional techniques, under the guidance of the expert supervision of craftsmen. Workshops are an ideal space for the presentation of crafts and their wide range of uses (ÚĽUV, 2022).

Keeping a database of producers and proper documentation of contemporary folk art provides an important cross-section and reference guide for the possibilities of craft production in Slovakia. Based on the prepared databases, another effort of the organisation is to create a point of contact between the craft and the sphere of artistic creation. Through its activities, it thus contributes to the cooperation of craftsmen with artists and designers. Thanks to this cooperation, there is a mutual transfer of knowledge and skills which has a positive effect on newly created products in the form of innovations as well as preservation of the craft production traditions (successful cooperation with designers like Janka Menkynová, Lubica Poncik, Michal Hanula, Martin Hartínk, etc.). Subsequently, this organisation also maintains a level of quality and oversees the maintenance of the traditional material design as well as preservation and recording of the techniques of their production process.

A good example of contribution to the creation of new products inspired by traditional crafts is the design competition organised by ÚĽUV – Kruhy na vode (Rings in the water). The competition is a space for the generation of new applied art and design which attempts to preserve the traditional values of craft production. Kruhy na vode is similar to the Handwerk + Form competition organised by the aforementioned Werkraum Brezgenzerwald. Nevertheless, Kruhy na vode is not exclusively tied to a specific location. The works receive internationally recognised award (Fig. 3) and the possibility to be sold under the ÚĽUV brand. Through the competition, it is possible to distrib-

ute the works on the market and to make them visible as well as to maintain the identity in modern products of daily use (SAShE, 2018).

This kind of preservation of traditions through modern design can be seen in the work of designer Jakub Liška (Fig. 4). After completing his studies, Jakub Liška continued with the pottery tradition of his father and later founded the company Modranska. His intention was to revive the tradition of Modra ceramics through new techniques and production procedures. With the use of new morphology and graphic processing of the decoration (by adding new patterns), he also created a modern type of utilitarian majolica with a group of collaborators (Bohunický, 2018). The development of folk art is natural and influenced by many changes over time. However, these changes are necessary for its maintenance, as can be seen in the work of Jakub Liška. Thanks to modernisation, ceramics have become attractive for today's generation. The Modranska brand is one of the popular products in Slovakia as well as abroad. Expansion at an international level is of great importance in preserving, consolidating and especially sharing and celebrating cultural heritage (Bohunický, 2018).



Fig. 3. Competition Rings in the Water - 2nd Award, Miroslav Mládenek, bowls Hlavy (Heads). (Photo: Peter Simoník, 2016; Source: ÚĽUV, 2016)



Fig. 4. Jakub Liška in Modranska. (Photo: Magdaléna Tomalová for Milk, Source: Kóňa, 2020)

RESEARCHED REGIONS: HONT AND NOVOHRAD

Based on a survey of foreign as well as domestic tendencies in the field of regional development, the contribution further focuses on the possibilities of implementing design and creative activity in a specific area of the regions of Southern Slovakia (Fig. 5). The area of interest is also referred to as Poiplie, as it is a region located along the Ipel' River. Poiplie is formed by the regions of Hont and Novohrad. The name comes from former Hungarian counties that in turn got their designation on the basis of administrative county centres, which were in Hont – Hont Castle (a defunct castle in the village of Hont on the territory of today's Hungary, near the Hungarian-Slovak border) and in Novohrad – Novohrad Castle (on the territory of today's Hungary). In the past, as county units, they occupied a much larger territory. In 1918, the counties were divided by the state border with Hungary which was definitively established in 1925 (Brloš, 2009). The southern parts of the historical counties are thus located on the territory of today's Hungary. The Hont County is a smaller area made up of 19 municipalities along the Slovakian-Hungarian border. Novohrad County was divided into two units of almost equal area, Veľký and Malý Novohrad, while Malý Novohrad became a part of Hungary.

For this reason, the northern parts of the regions are predominantly made up of the population of Slovak nationality, while the Hungarian ethnic group is predominant in the southern regions. In Hont, for instance, the northern border of the Hungarian ethnic settlement is formed by the line of the villages of Hontianska Vrbica, Plášťovce and Čebovce. In Novohrad, it is the line south of Lučenec and Veľký Krtíš. There are ethnically mixed villages in these areas. Similarly, there are villages with Slovak settlements on Hungarian territory that have preserved cultural features and customs from Hont or Novohrad, examples are the Slovak settlements in the neighbourhood of Balážske Ďarmoty and Selešťany. As a result of migration, however, the population ratio is currently changing (Beňušková, 1998). Due to the national diversity of the population in the Poiplie region, regional awareness is low. Cultural overlaps occur and the society loses a sense of regional identity and belonging. The individual has difficulty defining his identity and belonging. It is therefore more than necessary to follow up on the existing cultural signs in the given location, define them correctly and interpret them in an adequate way, locally but also beyond the borders of the regions.



Fig. 5. Upper-Hungarian Slovak District 1861. (Source: AmateurSlovakHistorian, 2019)

In the past, Novohrad was one of the most developed regions of Hungary in what was then Slovakia. It is considered one of the oldest territorial-legal entities in Hungary. Its origin dates back to the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries when the territory of Hont also fell under its administration, which was subsequently

separated in the 11th century (Beňušková, 1998). However, the cultures of these two areas are mutually influencing each other until the present time. The territory thus has an interesting history and a well-preserved traditional culture as well as natural wealth. Currently, the regions of Hont and Novohrad are among the less developed regions affected by poverty and a high level of unemployment. Considering the aforementioned regional specifics of the location in a proper way can help regions in the fight against high unemployment and support the development of ethno-, agro- and ecotourism.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Regional development and its maintenance consist in systematic and creative creation which is often absent. This situation creates space for designers who, through extensive informative research, creative activity and modern technologies, can identify systematic steps oriented to maintaining culture. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate design into the regionalisation process. Design plays a fundamental role in the creation of new products, services and systems. It is a way of solving problems and finding the best solutions aimed at a wide range of users. Design can positively influence the quality of public space and services, increase innovation in the region and respond to societal expectations. Design requires expertise and a support system to implement it. That is why it is so important to create a network of cooperation and exchange of information between entrepreneurs, designers, representatives of self-governing units and the academic community.

Case study 1

The initial phase of the research was inspired by the mentioned foreign projects with the focus on creating a space for the cooperation of craftsmen and local stakeholders in the framework of the design process. We prioritised creation, production from locally available materials and distribution of regional products in the studied region as well as beyond its borders, for the purpose of economic and cultural development. The partial goal was to design and create a product or a collection of products inspired by the local folk culture. In the academic sphere, there was an attempt to materialise this idea through the studio work of the fifth year of study at the Institute of Design (Faculty of Architecture, Slovak University of Technology, 2019), on the topic of the IDENTITY SK project, under the guidance of Michala Lipková. The project was implemented simultaneously with the "Follow the Root" project. The impetus for the creation of the project was the pedagogical mobility of the American designer with Slovak roots, John Zachary Yelnosky, who had then successfully completed his studies at the University of Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

"The aim of the project, from teachers' side, was to experiment with the teaching methodology of the studio oriented to product design. The pedagogical intention was to expand students' expertise in research methodology focused on the area of design inspired by local crafts and material culture (according to Banika's terminology - the field of ethnodesign)." (Lipková, 2021) The resulting product of the project (OZI hanger) corresponds to the peasant tradition of the village of Želovce (Novohrad region). As for the material solution (the original material used for the production of the scythe - ash and maple wood) and morphology, the effort was to preserve the authenticity of the source of inspiration, i.e. the scythe (the simplicity of processing - the possibilities of the carpenters of the time), which was the most important tool of the farmer during the harvest season, as well as the identity in the three-legged construction, which represents mutual help and support of the farmers of the studied area.



Fig. 6. Coat hanger OZI. (Photo: Tomáš Pářiš, 2019)

In order for the created products to represent a specific region, it is necessary to follow up on the design language of the area through a comprehensive survey of the local folk culture and thus, reflect it in their specific morphology and material composition. In order to capture the design language of the region and guide creation, it is therefore necessary to become familiar with locally available materials, technologies and craftsmen. Research in the field of crafts and their products is an integral part of the process. Depending on the needs of the local population and the availability of materials, various important crafts developed in the regions. However, many have disappeared to this day. A search in available databases and field research are necessary for the processing of current craft activities (in many cases, craft is a free-time activity of individual “garage craftsmen”, their existence is therefore unknown without field research). Current existing trades in the regions: carving, carpentry, cooper, tailoring, whistle-making, wickerwork, lace-making, embroidery, Easter egg-making, honey-making, musical instrument-making, bag-making, glass-blowing.

In the course of research, it is also important to establish cooperation in professional circles, for instance in the field of social sciences, cultural studies, sociology, economics, etc. Interdisciplinary cooperation will significantly help in the domain of scientific activity and the value of the information obtained in the genesis of proposals. The subsequent step consists in the creation of locally sustainable relations based on cooperation that can be achieved by segmented production of products, which will involve the participation of several areas of the region. In the creation process, one of the goals is to establish a creative space with active regional cooperation and to deter-

mine a systematic creative process. Since not only the cooperation during the creation of design contributes to economic development, but it also leads to the unification of society and the restoration of cultural belonging. The research will serve as a guide to innovative ways of approaching regional development and at the same time will be a model for the surrounding regions. (Kotradyová, Borysko, Lipková, 2022)

The original research method was aimed at the creation of a product, which in its essence is the designer’s subjective view of the local culture of the Hont and Novohrad regions, while the participation of the population in the creation process is limited to the form of processing materials and production. The result is the product of an individual who tries to implement design as an element of regional development, regardless of the needs of the local population. This approach turned out to be inappropriate. The project itself and its resulting semester work is successful and meets the assignment criteria but in the follow-up of the work, however, the author prefers the participation of the local population in the creation process as a direct source of regional knowledge, as part of the design in the regional cultural sphere. Design should not act as a foreign element dictating the direction of culture on the basis of customary process actions. Its task is to adapt to the researched environment and, using expert knowledge, to support living segments of culture that people identify with and consider as signs of their identity.

Case study 2

Due to the failure of the first research method, the following part of the article is devoted to a new research method, which consists in conducting field research of the area through interviews with the local population and establishing cooperation with cultural and artistic associations in the regions. Establishing a closer contact with the population is a key step in revealing the real and living cultural values of the region recognised by the wider public. It is essential to cooperate with educational centres that possess important information about cultural life and artistic creation in the region. Their expert-advisory, methodical and information-documentation activity will serve as an important source of information for the benefit of ongoing research. The organisation is also in intensive contact and cooperates with the towns and villages of the region in organising cultural events. The available network of established connections and contacts of the educational centre will serve as an ideal centre for site research. The cultural, educational and methodical institution HOS (Hontiansko-ipeľské osvetové stredisko) has been established for the Hont area. The centre is located in the district town of Veľký Krtíš, Slovakia. The Novohrad Education Centre with its headquarters in Lučenec operates in the Novohrad region (HOS, 2022).

The research team focused on the Hont educational centre because of existing contacts in the district. Moreover, the educational centre is located in the Veľký Krtíš district which is at the border of both regions. The location appears to be ideal in an effort to discover a cultural heritage that would fulfil the representative function of both regions. Following the consultation with the HOS director, Cyril Pářiš, the research team acquired information about the existence of the Hont Workshop of traditional craft. Various educational courses take place in the workshop under the guidance of methodologist Katarína Hanková (she is in charge of folklore and traditional culture, film, education, research and digitisation at HOS) and her colleagues. By organising courses, they try to develop the aesthetic sense of the general public, develop skills and creative abilities in cooperation with craftsmen, and last but not least, they try to revive the local population’s interest in cultural heritage. HOS organizes the following courses: “Let’s sew robes”, a course in lace, making

straw baskets, making and modifying costume parts, crocheting and knitting. In addition to courses, the workshop also offers space for repairing of traditional costumes.

Popular courses include the “Let’s sew our robes” course and the lace-making course. The content of the course “Sewing robes” is the creation of products inspired by traditional folk clothing from the Hont region. There is also a visible effort to produce and distribute products with a regional character. These include bags, pouches and clothing components (shirts, skirts, etc.) with specific Hont and Novohrad patterns. The production process is simplified for course members due to time constraints and for the ease of technical teaching. For instance, during this course, participants learn how to make a traditional skirt: the Čelovský type of skirt is chosen, which represents the simplest cut. The creation process also requires an adequate replacement of materials (Fig. 7) due to the reduction of production costs (instead of real cashmere, an imitation with an identical pattern, colour and structure is used - the price of real cashmere is significantly more expensive). The course of beaded lace has a significant importance in the Hont Workshop of Traditional Crafts. Through the courses, this craft is spread and preserved among the population.

In the past, beaded lace was used in many areas of Slovakia. Individual regions as well as their villages were differentiated by a specific type of lace. They differed in the way of knitting, weave, material used, colour, etc. Lacemaking schools and workshops were also established in some areas (Hont, Banská Hodruša - from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century). According to the prevailing type of employment in the area, lace is divided into miner and peasant lace. Miner lace was produced in the northern part of Hont with a developed mining industry (Banská Hodruša, Banská Štiavnica, etc.) and some villages in the Veľký Krtíš and Lučenec districts. These were delicate white laces made of thin yarn, primarily intended for sale (Lešková, Mihálik, Miháliková, 2006). In the remaining parts of Hont and Novohrad with predominant agricultural activity, the production of peasant lace was developed. Peasant lace was intended for personal use or distribution to the surrounding area. Its structure was solid, intended for the working environment. It was made of thicker and stronger yarn (e.g. linen, hemp threads). At the beginning of the 20th century, its decoration was expanded to include a spectrum of coloured threads. Chopstick lace had a wide scope of use in the regions. It was used as a decoration for caps, parts of women’s costumes (like skirts, shirts and even sheets, to name but a few) or in the production of tablecloths or bed sheets. The eventual modernisation of costumes, however, caused the gradual disappearance of lace.

The traditional Hont and Novohrad lace turned out to be a still living and largely well-preserved cultural heritage thanks to the activities of the HOS and individuals from the district. The greatest merit in maintaining this tradition belongs to Andrej Kmeť (1841-1908), a collector of lace and embroidery in Hont. The tradition of Hont lace is maintained mainly by organising courses. The courses are presented in a pleasant environment with a direct contact with the material and processing technology. After completing the basic course, many participants decide to continue with additional extension courses. Two pilot courses of Hont lace were held in 1995 under the auspices of the Regional Cultural Centre in Veľký Krtíš and subsequently, extension courses were organised (Lešková, Mihálik, Miháliková, 2006). The courses were led by experts, namely the following: Tatiana Uhrinová and Iveta Žlnková from Veľký Krtíš, Anna Matejkinová from Litava (masters traditional lace knitting without pattern), Juraj Zajonc and Oľga Pipíšová-Fratričová (experts in the demanding patterns of Hont and Novohrad lace).



Fig. 7. Materials for workshop “Let’s sew our robes”, Hontianska dielňa tradičného remesla (Hontian workshop of traditional craft). (Photo: Tomáš Páriš, 2022)

Another important event is the Čipka festival in Hont which has been organised every year since 2003: 2003 - Sucháň, 2004 - Lackov, 2005 - Senohrad, Litava, Lackov, Sucháň, 2006 - Cerovo, Príbelce, Lackov, Sucháň, Litava, 2022 - Sucháň. This is an exhibition of traditional peasant lace with a demonstration of lace making in the reserved premises of the village (Lešková, Triznová, 2012). An important role in documenting the traditional lace of Hont and Novohrad is currently held by Iveta Žlnková. She did not inherit the drumming technique but rather she acquired it by studying literature and taking courses in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Her precise work could be seen at several exhibitions in Slovakia (Krakovany, Nová Dubnica, Trenčín, Veľký Krtíš, Žilina) and also abroad (Czech Republic, Belgium, Croatia) Her painted patterns are a rare documentation of historical preserved laces, many works of this tradition come to life anew.

The laces of Hont and Novohrad are a specific cultural heritage of the regions. They have built a solid background through organising festivals and workshops. However, social interest is declining. In order to preserve this tradition, it is necessary to bring it closer to the current generation. It requires a new user form that would be interesting even for the current generation. However, the tradition must be preserved so that it is recognisable and accepted by the public. Participatory design will therefore be a key aspect of creation. Participatory or cooperative design is a valuable tool in the field of design creation. Its role is to involve stakeholders – designers, researchers and end users – in the design process to ensure that the final product meets all the needs of the consumer. This new approach comes from Scandinavia and results from the fact that consumers were forced to adapt to the designers' and companies' ideas and principles that were not intuitive to them after purchasing a product. By using participatory design methods, we eliminate this undesirable phenomenon and create products that meet almost all of society's requirements. Therefore, it is essential in the next step to deepen the cooperation with HOS members and lace experts as well as active participants in courses with the intention of creating regional products.



Fig. 8. A collection of beaded lace of Iveta Žlínková. (Photo: Tomáš Páříš, 2022)

CONCLUSION

Based on the aforementioned current state of Slovak folk culture, it is recommended to take necessary steps in pursuit of this cultural maintenance. The investigated regions of Hont and Novohrad require exceptional specific attention and support because of this low regional awareness by the local population. In this case, design becomes an ideal vehicle for cultural development of the region as well as a means of its economic support. It is thus essential to incorporate design into the regionalisation process. Regions have a unique cultural identity and a specific character of material culture which must be followed up and supported by establishing practical and systematic creation processes. It is essential to draw inspiration from existing projects (Werkraum Bregenzwald, Design Silesia, and Sploty na fali). However, it is necessary to transform the existing creative procedures in a suitable and relevant way for the given location, then apply these strategies and verify their functionality. Ultimately, because these procedures may have a different functionality in other countries, they may not work effectively in Slovak regions. Eventually, a successful outcome is influenced by natural, socio-cultural, geopolitical, historical and other phenomenological factors that have shaped the area over time.

Nevertheless, the authors consider that the establishment of a cooperative enterprise with the local government, local population, activists and cultural associations is the most crucial factor of the creation process, with the intention of identifying living cultural elements that have strong roots in the identity of the locality and the potential for further development. Similarly, on the basis of cooperation with the local cultural centre HOS and interested parties, it was possible to reveal one of the living cultural heritages which is significant for the Hont and Novohrad region – the traditional lace of Hont and Novohrad. The expected goal of the research and future workshops is the collective design of representative products that are intended for the current market in terms of raising awareness and preserving the investigated signature of this regional identity. By collaborating in the design process, we can thus support and revive certain existing elements of folk culture into a contemporary, sustainable form through products with the attributes of local identity that would be acceptable to the local society.

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