

Collaborative craft

Enabling serendipity by community building and craft by Martin Mjartan

Doctoral research:

Realization:

Researcher:

Research supervisor:

Text:

Design as an Integrating Element of
the STU Creative Center in Bratislava
2018 – 2021

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In his dissertation thesis, *Design as an Integrating Element of The STU Creative Center in Bratislava*, Martin Mjartan focuses on intersections of community building and craft-based design practice in the tertiary design education context. Learning from the theory of creativity and the history of creative industries, the core of Mjartan's research activities involves creating opportunities for unexpected interdisciplinary connections to arise in the academic environment through the discussion platform *Pechtler Mechtler*.

In the suggested pedagogical approach, Mjartan emphasizes the importance of being active in the local and international creative community by directly collaborating with artisans and producers. Using features of informal education, workshops organized by Martin have allowed students to explore different materials, e.g., leather making, concrete 3D printing, and working with hemp. The most recent collaboration with Herbert Syrups presents experiments with hand-blown glass.

Martin Mjartan's research keywords are communication, creativity, collaboration, community, and execution. The emphasis on prototyping and 'making things happen' was appar-

ent in all his activities during the studies. The doctoral research focuses on direct contribution to the local context of design education at the FAD STU and the development of the

Creative Center of STU (CC STU), located in the faculty's building. The goal of the emerging CC STU fulfills the role of a multidisciplinary platform, aiming to support cooperation between various disciplines at the technical university and fields of creative practice beyond the academic environment.

While the concept of the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) needs no introduction anymore, Mjartan's reflection revolves around the notion of 'creativity,' quoting Csikszentmihalyi (2013): "Creative individuals are exceptional because of their ability to adapt to almost any situation and work with whatever is available to achieve goals. (...) Creativity does not happen in people's heads but in the interaction of a person's thought processes with his socio-cultural context. It is a systemic rather than an individual phenomenon."

In the context of product design education, Mjartan criticizes the concept of the 'sole genius', and he suggests understanding creativity as the "result of relationships and people's interaction with the surrounding facts or context in which creativity is manifested" (Mjartan, 2021, 18), referring to the Sawyer's claim that "creativity is almost 80% learned and acquired" (Sawyer, 2013).

In his thesis, Mjartan proposes a definition of "design as a profession combining various disciplines' discoveries into complex works of aesthetic and ethical qualities" (Mjartan, 2021, 20). The thesis sums up seven in-depth interviews with recognized experts and, at the same time, active connectors from different research centers and knowledge hubs across STU, ranging from scientific fields concerned with basic research, such as photonics or machine vision, to applied research fields such as robotics or civil engineering. All interviews agree that collaboration between different departments and practices is highly desirable and plays a key role in the university's future development in an international sense.

How can we effectively prepare a design student for successful work in contemporary creative practice with the need for multidisciplinary and with the definition, as mentioned earlier, of creativity in mind? Mjartan tries to answer the question by experimenting with two forms of informal education:

■ Informal discussion in the form of a public event

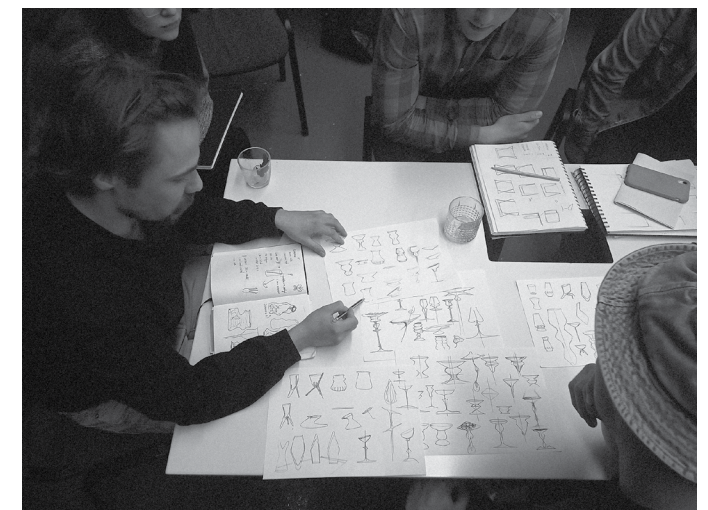
The discussion platform Pechtle Mechtle was founded in 2016 as a grassroots activity of a group of students of FAD STU's master design course (Petra Debnárová, Adriana Bártyayová, Zuzana Wasczuková, Matej Čička, and Martin Mjartan). By the time of thesis publication, 35 public discussions had been organized, hosting 52 speakers. What started as an informal networking activity from pure curiosity later evolved into a popular go-to event with wide recognition. Mjartan's survey confirmed that the participating students consider targeted interactive discussions with creative industry members a relevant part of their design education.

■ One-off voluntary workshops

In a four-year timeframe, from 2018 to 2021, Martin Mjartan conducted 7 practical workshops dedicated to different materials and topics of the creative industry. All workshops were promoted through an open call, and participation in them was — as it was in the case of the discussion platform — voluntary, outside the existing curriculum. Workshops have always filled their capacity even though they were not mandatory and came with a cost (in some cases). Partners from the creative industry were extremely helpful in providing all the necessary know-how and tools for the workshop. Three out of seven workshops were organized on request from the local companies: the project Clean or Dirty? (in Slovak 'Čistý či špinavý?'), initiated by Slovak firm Redox s.r.o., a creative marketplace for the City of Žilina, and a Hempcrete workshop in cooperation with Austrian startup Hempstatic. All workshops focused on craft-based design, and small series production brought satisfactory results (the workshops Experience Leather / Zaži kožu, Taste the Clay / Ochutnaj Hlinu, and Blow Glass / Fúkni sklo). The follow-up surveys confirmed that workshop participants considered a practical workshop a "time-efficient form of design education."

Right: Atmosphere of craft-based design workshops organized by Martin Mjartan

Next doublepage: Experimental drinking glass designs and a steel mold for shaping hand-blown glass by Martin Mjartan





Based on the realized and evaluated activities, Mjartan's research contributes to the ongoing discussion on the future of design education, confirming the need for new roles of the lecturer in the contemporary context of higher education, such as content curation and management (Černý, 2019), creation of opportunities for "the act of knowing and as a creative act" to emerge (Freire, 1970, 75–79) or development of an "achievement habit" (Roth, 2015) through iterative and multidisciplinary project-based learning.

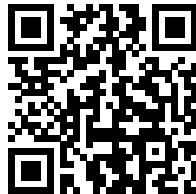
The project Blow Glass #2, on display as a part of the installation at the Designblok '23, is a continuation of one of the previously mentioned craft-based design workshops focused on familiarising students with the specific requirements of designing for small-series production. Organized for the first time during the pandemic, the Blow Glass workshop focused on experimentation with the traditional hand-blown glass technique, using wooden or metallic molds. Both glass collections were designed by FAD STU students with Martin's support and supervision and prototyped through partly remote, partly direct cooperation with glass artist and craftsman Ondřej Novotný from renowned Czech glassworks in Nový Bor.

The second workshop was organized by Martin, already in his new role of assistant professor, after successfully defending his thesis in 2021. The collection resulting from the Blow Glass #2 workshop series presents 12 pieces of drinking glass designed for Slovak producers of local handcrafted syrups - the brand Herbert Syrups from Trnava. The brief identified

three types of drinking glasses the brand is currently interested in producing:

- "long drink glass" for the brand's new fermented, prosecco-like drink (200 ml);
- "mixed drink glass" with the approx. volume 300 - 400 ml for both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks;
- "lemonade glass" (500 ml).

The result of the workshop is 12 unique pieces of glass intended for serial production. The creative part of the Blow Glass project took place in April and May 2023 at the FAD STU in Bratislava as a series of design workshops. An important part of the whole process was the participation of brand representatives at the feedback sessions, commenting on the student designs, sharing insight into the business side of syrup making, and providing an actual tasting of the products. The authors of the 12 designs: Ondrej Ferianec, Anna Gergelyová, Barbora Hagarová, Rebeca Ihringová, Juraj Kotoč, Martin Miština, Tomáš Pářiš, Barbora Pavlikovská, Vanessa Píverová, Paulína Varechová, Martin Sombathy and Martin Mjartan.

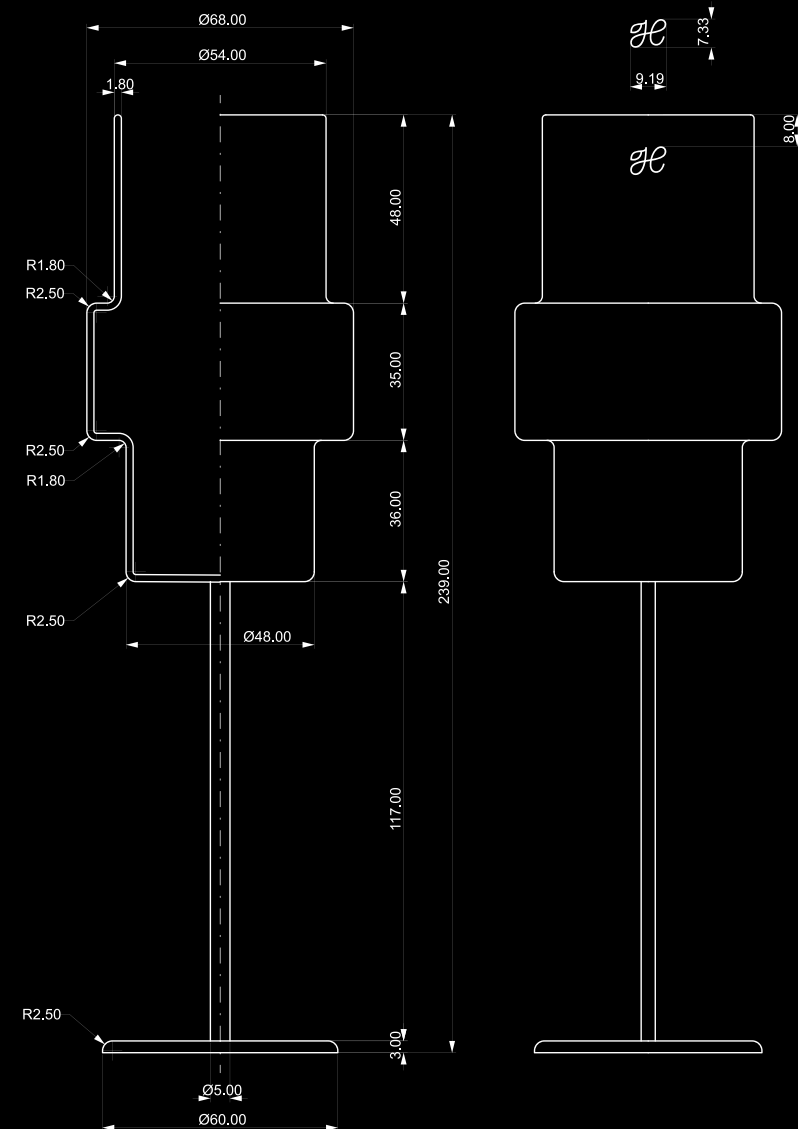


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Martin Mjartan's creative work is centered around hands-on experimentation and sculptural work with metal. In 2018, Martin participated in the very first Young Ambassador program at Michelangelo Foundation's Homo Faber exhibition in Venice. Several of his works are permanently placed in public space, including the IMMORTAL TRUTH monument in memory of the murdered journalists Daphne Caruana Galizia and Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová.



Technical drawing of a drinking glass design for the Herbert Syrups brand by Martin Sombathy



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