

# A new approach in the training of designers: from graphic design to sensory design and creative direction<sup>1\*</sup>

Un nuevo abordaje en la formación de diseñadores: del diseño gráfico al diseño sensorial y a la dirección creativa

María del Mar Sanz Abbud

FIRST AND CORRESPONDENCE AUTHOR

CONCEPTUALIZATION - RESEARCH

ANALYSIS AND VISUALIZATION

Marimar.sanz@ibero.mx

Universidad Iberoamericana

Mexico City, Mexico

ORCID: 0000-0002-2753-0904

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## Abstract

The text presents research that addresses the paradigm shift in designer training, moving from the traditional focus on graphic design towards sensory design and creative direction. It highlights the need to adapt to technological advances, user demands, and the skills required in the current work environment. The Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City leads this transition by proposing a new degree that integrates graphic design into a broader approach. An innovative educational model is introduced where students work on projects guided by various academics. The methodology used is based on qualitative techniques with faculty to gather information about the implementation process. Preliminary results show proposals that incorporate sensory and technological elements, especially in the first semester of the degree. However, it is necessary to wait for the graduation of the first generation to evaluate the professional success of this approach.

**Keywords:** graphic design, sensory design, educational model, multisensoriality

## Resumen

El texto presenta una investigación que aborda el cambio de paradigma en la formación de diseñadores, pasando del enfoque tradicional en diseño gráfico hacia el diseño sensorial y la dirección creativa. Se destaca la necesidad de adaptarse a los avances tecnológicos, las demandas de los usuarios y las competencias requeridas en el ámbito laboral actual. La Universidad Iberoamericana de la Ciudad de México lidera esta transición al proponer una nueva licenciatura que integra el diseño gráfico en un enfoque más amplio. Se introduce un modelo educativo innovador donde los estudiantes trabajan en proyectos guiados por diversos académicos. La metodología utilizada se basa en técnicas cualitativas con el profesorado para recopilar información sobre el proceso de implementación. Los resultados preliminares muestran propuestas que incorporan elementos sensoriales y tecnológicos, especialmente en el primer semestre de la licenciatura. Sin embargo, es necesario esperar a la graduación de la primera generación para evaluar el éxito profesional de este enfoque.

**Palabras clave:** diseño gráfico, diseño sensorial, modelo educativo, multisensorialidad

### ◆ From graphic design to sensory design

It is understood that graphic design specializes in visual communication processes for different media. It generates visual narratives, based on visual literacy, made up of symbols and signs that offer meanings to audiences, according to the requested objective, to provide solutions that can be practical, symbolic, aesthetic or all of the above, but with the understanding that they always communicate.

This design is based on three dimensions: syntactic (forms), semantic (meanings) and pragmatic (environment), and contemplates the production process. In Figure 1 we can observe the elements, principles and fundamentals that make up the three dimensions, that are the basis for the construction of graphic products.

Common places are generated through visual signs and symbols, allowing for a shared reading of the world and guiding us to understand both who we are and the way we communicate, connect and understand our context. The designer has a series of competencies that, for conceptualization and creative thinking processes, result in visible products. It is known that the main access to information, in most people, is from sight, since from this they have an understanding of their environment, of their thinking. Thinking requires images, which subsequently form mental concepts, therefore, graphic design turns out to have an essential value in the construction of our thoughts and concepts, which falls on the cultural construction of societies.

The result of graphic design is visual, as we understand it and as most graphic design theorists expose it. So, the ability to acquire information, the cognitive processes, the emotional connections with graphic design products, are they limited to sight? Doesn't the individual rely on the entire sensory system to receive information and understand its environment? If design is to provide solutions to the human being, increasingly in more complex environments, by using sight as the hegemonic sense, isn't the use of other senses limited? According to Bedolla Pereda (2020), in the "current industrial society that has primarily favored through its artificial world: spaces, objects and media, a single

sense, essentially sight and to a lesser extent hearing" (p. 6). Why not consider the other senses to generate new proposals?

In the last two decades, design research has explored new ways of having an impact on the human being, which provoke or evoke positive, memorable emotions, based on experiences that enrich its quality of life; however, it is detected that most graphic design products are visual and secondarily make use of sound. According to Bedolla Pereda (2020), the absence of other senses in design processes is due to disinterest or lack of knowledge. If we look at our environment, at consumer and cultural spaces, we can validate this assertion, as it is evident. The human being is familiar with each of the senses, although we are not always aware of it, so much so that only when we lack one do we realize the value it has in our lives.

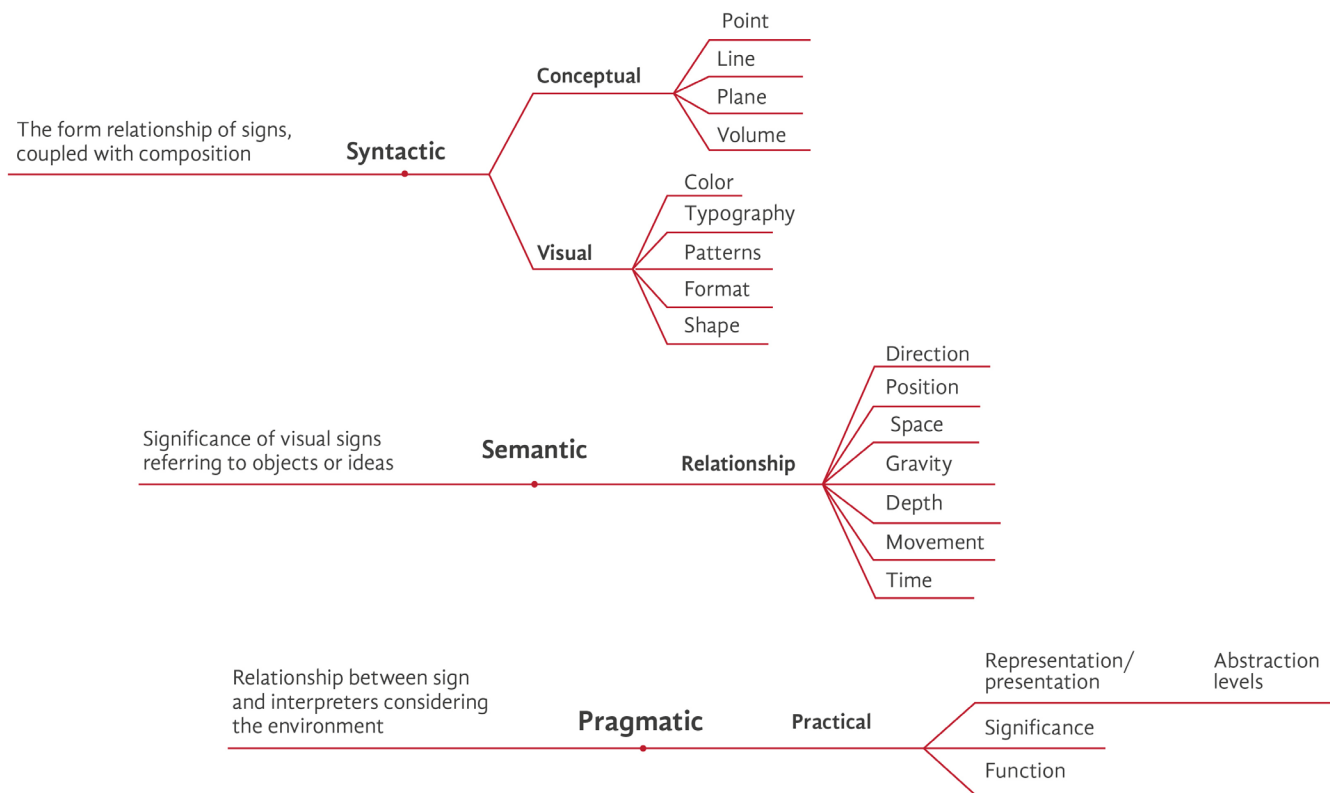


Figure 1. Syntactic, semantic and pragmatic dimensions  
Source: Own elaboration.

As design is related to the object, the tangible, in the last two decades research has been carried out on the relationship between it and the person, which involves beyond a physical connection, even connections that can be emotional and affective, which gives this link a value of transcendence in the journey of human life, in addition to connecting us with others and with our environment. The results of these investigations have

allowed us to understand this relationship and build studies on the subject (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981; Desmet & Hekkert, 2007; Richins, 1994) that are detected more specifically from psychology, marketing and, particularly, in neurosciences.

Adding to these explorations, Lindstrom (2011) presents the importance of the sensory in brand strategies and exposes several examples of how some of them have applied the use of more than two senses, in addition to sight.

From a series of experiments, it was detected that brands that, apart from using images, are accompanied by other sensory stimuli are more effective and memorable, this due to the fact that several regions of the brain are activated simultaneously. To mention one, the sense of smell activates the same areas of the brain as a visual stimulus, although this is the most primitive and ingrained (Lindstrom, 2009). In this regard, it is concluded that most decisions are produced in the subconscious and have a direct relationship with the senses because the brain collects all the information from taste, touch, hearing, and smell to determine if that product is necessary or not (Krishna, 2012).

The Spanish Branding Association (2020) exposes how sensoriality relates to brand strategies, and although it affirms that, from sight, 90% of the information received by our brain is perceived, it points out that sound perception has the potential to change the environment according to 71% of people, and that the human body has more than 130 touch receptor points distributed throughout the body, in addition to the fact that the experience of touching allows expanding information when selecting a product. In relation to smell, it is recognized that up to 75% of the emotions we generate are influenced by a smell, that more than 10,000 aromas can be distinguished, and that the brain has the ability to remember 65% of an aroma clearly even after a year. Regarding the sense of taste, although it is the least explored, initiatives are being carried out to generate an experience with products and thus cause them to be memorable (Spanish Branding Association, 2020). On the other hand, interoception and kinesthesia are also considered, deriving a series of characteristics from each. All this research is only a first look at the subject, so it is recognized that more exploration of each of the senses is needed, as shown in Figure 2.

The complexity of the human being turns out to be a broad source for the development of design proposals that add to comprehensive experiences, since, in addition to physiological processes, there are psychological processes at a multisensory level, which gives rise to a series of sensations, emotions and feelings at different levels both of the person and its environment.

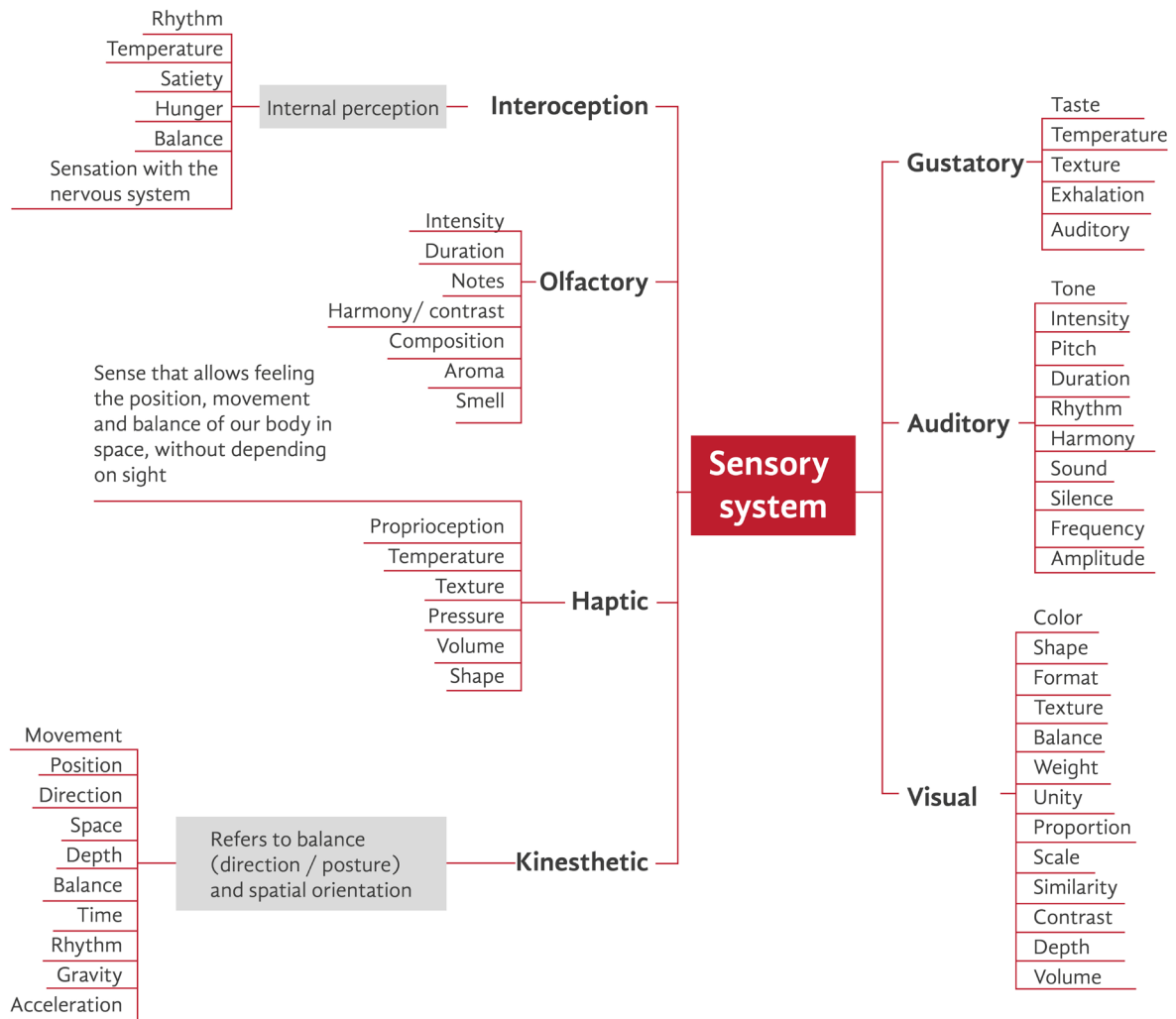


Figure 2. Sensory system  
 Source: Prepared with the Academic College of Sensory Design and Creative Direction of the Universidad Iberoamericana.

Ellen Lupton, one of the pioneers in the field of multisensory design, explains that design can involve all the senses to create meaningful experiences. In her book *The Senses: Design Beyond Vision* (Lupton & Lipps, 2018) she presents a wide range of projects, from art installations to commercial products, where the senses are involved, and demonstrates how this affects our daily experiences, along with user-centered design, enriching interactions with our environment. The author emphasizes the connection between the senses, impact and emotional memory, based on certain sensory stimuli to generate evocations and significant and memorable experiences. In addition, she explains that

addressing sensory design allows for accessibility solutions for people with sensory disabilities, that is, it gives the opportunity to design inclusive environments and products for everyone (Lupton & Lipps, 2018). For his part, Jinsop (2013), based on common activities observed and graphed, detected that as more than one sense is integrated at the time of design, the experience becomes more rewarding.

If we add to this that we live in a society of visual saturation that makes it increasingly difficult to catch the attention of the receiver, it is understood that sensory design makes it possible to have a broader field of action, which not only considers cognitive processes, but also takes into account affective and sensory factors (Ortiz Nicolás, 2017). Understanding the sensory system opens a channel to connect with the receiver in different ways and tell narratives with more elements, not just visual. Thus, sensory design is a challenge for creativity, to create comprehensive proposals that allow being more significant and relevant by promoting well-being in our society as a new alternative to current demands and problems.

From this perspective, the Design Department of the Universidad Iberoamericana has given rise to a change from graphic design to sensory design.

### **A new model in student training in sensory design and creative direction**

With a prospective look at the approach to design education, this proposal adds current research on the field of design and the skills required in these times, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, work in interdisciplinary teams, knowledge of technologies, flexibility, resilience, negotiation and complex problem solving. Emotional intelligence, leadership and social influence, as well as service orientation, are also considered determinants to assertively face the challenges of society (Rojas Morales, 2019). Moreover, there is an oversupply of the degree in different institutions in the country, intense labor competition in the market and perceived fees of approximately 6.78k MX monthly (Data Mexico, 2023), which also motivates the search for a differentiator. In a dialogue with employers and graduates, it was exposed that the majority had performed in creative direction areas in organizations or entrepreneurship with a focus on design. The compilation and analysis of existing literature, as well as contextual and field research, provided the basis for the Design Department of the Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX, after a series of evidence and being a pioneer in offering the degree in graphic design in the late sixties, to present a new design proposal that goes beyond the visual: "Sensory Design and Creative Direction" (Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX, 2020), which seeks to train designers capable of offering multisensory solutions, considering the use of different media and technologies.

This implies not only focusing on the visual aspect of objects, but also on making proposals that add the other senses, also considering the relationship with space to generate proposals for experiences and services from the design perspective, thus expanding the designer's field of action in order to offer comprehensive solutions for human beings and their environment.

This new bet allows being in tune with current and resilient scenarios, given that we are in a BANI environment (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) (Huicab-García, 2023). In addition, this proposal includes the training of creative directors, which allows developing skills in the management and evaluation of creative production processes and resources with the different actors involved in creative processes to obtain tangible and intangible results.

This new curriculum does not seek to replace other design fields, such as graphic design, but offers a broader perspective. As Lupton mentions: "...on the contrary, it unites them, because graphic design, being visual, is also part of the sensory, but it joins other areas that are an important part of user experiences: Today, we interact with multiple products through various senses, touch, hearing, sight and this is integrated into an experience that generates emotions in users" (Herrera, 2023, n.p.).

In addition, the proposal for this new degree includes a new educational model for teaching that breaks with the structures of previous curricula. As Rojas Morales (2019) indicates: "...based on all the changes, it leads to reflection on the need to promote a change by proposing new training models, proposing schemes in accordance with current generations that promote learning and permanent updating and foster interdisciplinarity" (p. 453). An essential factor in this proposal is to place people as the main axis of the discipline, with an innovative and supportive approach, as well as with a systemic and prospective vision.

First, it focuses on the craft of design, where different designer knowledge is taught during the first three semesters; this space is called Workshops, where students focus on practical learning, complemented by courses and master lectures. It is an exercise in observation, experimentation, processes and construction of proposals.

Subsequently, they specialize in the so-called Studies, which seek to train the student in the selected discipline and provide an approach to professional reality, based on research that allows supporting the proposal in a creative and innovative way, that generates value, weaving a link with the business world up to the social sphere.

In parallel, the program has theoretical subjects, which allow reflections on the discipline, and laboratories that are interdisciplinary and focus on solving complex problems based on exploration and the interests of each

student. In this way, the frontiers of design are expanded with an experimental method, dialoguing and proposing solutions collaboratively to the challenges posed in the world. Finally, elective subjects that allow specialization are added to all of the above, as shown in Figure 3.

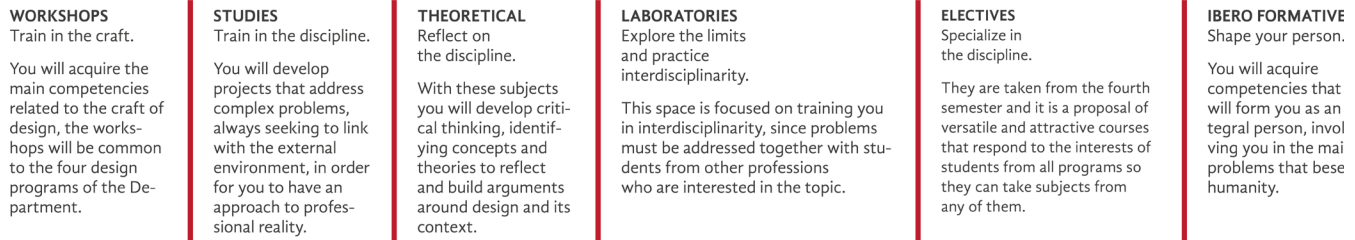


Figure 3. Program structure  
Source: Prepared with the Academic College Design Department, Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX.

This curricular model allows covering the knowledge in the training of Sensory Design and Creative Direction, as shown in the following curricular plan (see Figure 4), which seeks for graduates to have three essential competencies: a) Identify opportunity gaps, from a critical view of reality, based on direct observation of social practices and their particular contexts; b) Conceptualize and visualize design solutions, designer's ability to conceptualize and visualize design solutions; c) Implement design solutions, which is part of the designer's work, from a sustainable vision, giving a space for training, knowledge generation and connection.

This research, presents the first approximations on the results that the implementation of the curriculum has had, as well as the perception of academics and the proposals made by the students in this regard, as shown in the results herein.





Figure 4. Training model / Menresa Plan  
 Source: Prepared with the Academic College Design Department, Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX.

**Methodology**

The methodology adopted follows an inductive approach based on the grounded theory model. This approach facilitates an iterative research process that allows refining the information obtained and contributing to knowledge in the field of design. It is recognized that, compared to other disciplines, design lacks a considerable amount of documented and substantiated material. However, the research contributes to the body of knowledge in this discipline, allowing a deeper understanding of related cultural and social phenomena, as well as its epistemological construction. Furthermore, it not only helps to understand the impact of design on society, but also facilitates interdisciplinary dialogue in scientific terms, thus validating the existence and importance of this discipline (Cross, 2001; Manzini, 2015).

The methodology consists of three main phases, which are described below: a) Theoretical framework: A bibliographic review is carried out covering various sources, where research related to sensory design is presented, as well as an explanation of the establishment of the degree and the proposed educational model; b) Field research: Information is collected through surveys directed at faculty who have taught courses in the first semesters of the degree; c) Evidence of design proposals: Concrete examples of projects carried out by students during the first

semesters of study are presented, focusing particularly on the first semester; d) Conclusions and reflections: A synthesis of the collected information is carried out, integrating theoretical aspects, faculty perceptions and results of projects carried out by students. This allows obtaining the first conclusions and reflections on the degree in Sensory Design and Creative Direction.

**◆ First results on the implementation of the degree in Sensory Design and Creative Direction**

Having the first approximations regarding the implementation of the degree in Sensory Design and Creative Direction allows detecting that progress is being made in the right direction. It is important to recognize that, from its implementation to date, adjustments have been made. This new model allows being flexible and adapting to changes as necessary for the teaching-learning process of students. Given there are still no graduates, this first analysis covers only the first semester of the degree, as there is a greater amount of material. A survey was conducted aimed at adjunct faculty. It was decided not to include full-time faculty to avoid generating bias in the responses. This tool was applied to teachers who have taught classes in Workshop one. As mentioned previously, during the Workshop course, the craft of design is taught.

This workshop is made up of four academics who, based on the various knowledge they impart, focus on carrying out a single project over a period of five weeks, through which they explore the senses. Each workshop emphasizes one sense, in addition to sight. The first semester, according to the curricular plan, consists of three workshops: Faceted, Volumes and Surfaces, as shown in Figure 5.

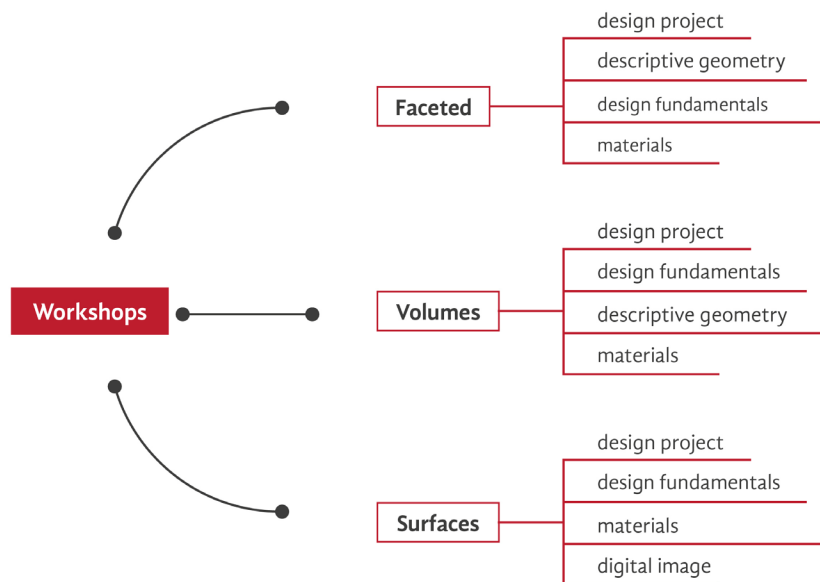


Figure 5. Workshops and their contents  
Source: Own elaboration.

The questionnaire was conducted online, considering three items, as shown below in Figure 6.

Item			
01.	Do you consider that the contents offered in the Sensory Design and Creative Direction degree, compared to the Graphic Design degree, are more in line with market demand and the current context?		
	Yes	No	Why?
02.	Does the teaching model in the first semesters of the Sensory Design and Creative Direction degree favorably develop student competencies for current times?		
	Yes	No	Why?
03.	Do you consider that the level of deliveries (quality, creativity, solution) presented in the Sensory Design and Creative Direction degree covers comprehensively (materials, interaction, proposal) different aspects compared to projects in the Graphic Design degree?		
	Yes	No	Why?

Figure 6. Item for adjunct faculty  
Source: Own elaboration.

**◆ The view of academics**

Based on the analysis of the responses obtained, the first approximations are reached. Academics are in favor of changing the degree to Sensory Design and Creative Direction, which is in accordance with current times and opens knowledge to new concepts that designers should have, which represents a challenge in the development and updating of new content and research in this field.

In fact, teachers state that labor markets demand new skills that are in tune with the curricula, which in turn allow progress with respect to the case of artificial intelligence. However, they also indicate that times become compromised with the execution of each of the workshops and, therefore, they do not manage to delve into the fundamental topics of the discipline in the first semesters, as occurred in the Graphic Design degree with the previous curriculum. And, at the same time, they express that this new plan provokes a dynamic in which the student must commit to complementing their learning from other means without expecting the university to provide them everything.

Likewise, professors particularly perceive that the new plan tends to give more weight to product design than to sensory design, although they mention that this situation is compensated later with the subjects called Studies.

For some, this new teaching model has been a challenge, especially in coordination and dialogue with other teachers, as they consider that an important factor is to have open communication to avoid contradictions within the classroom, especially given that it is shared teaching, where the knowledge of each academic is respected, but simultaneously adds to a common goal. Finally, respondents accept that the program must mature and adjust as part of an implementation process.

◆ **From the student perspective**

Below are examples of results from each of the workshops carried out by students, as part of the log they make in each workshop, which allows for a first approach to the scope and development of the competencies they are acquiring, as well as their perception of the learning process.

Figure 7 presents the process of the Faceted workshop, which begins with the exploration of a fruit to the realization of a concept. This includes the object in volume, descriptive geometry and sensory box. According to the student, "The creative process carried out was quite complicated, but very interesting. This work gave me the opportunity to think about the everyday in a completely different way to make it extraordinary. Finding inspiration for a product or service in a fruit seems to me a rather complex mission that only a designer can handle and, at the same time, I think this work is quite important in the industry, since design is what will give identity to a product and make it different from the rest. Personally, in this first module I found all the work done quite pleasant, I consider that I obtained new skills and was able to understand a little more what design is and its importance in everyday life." (Benítez, 2023, p. 1).

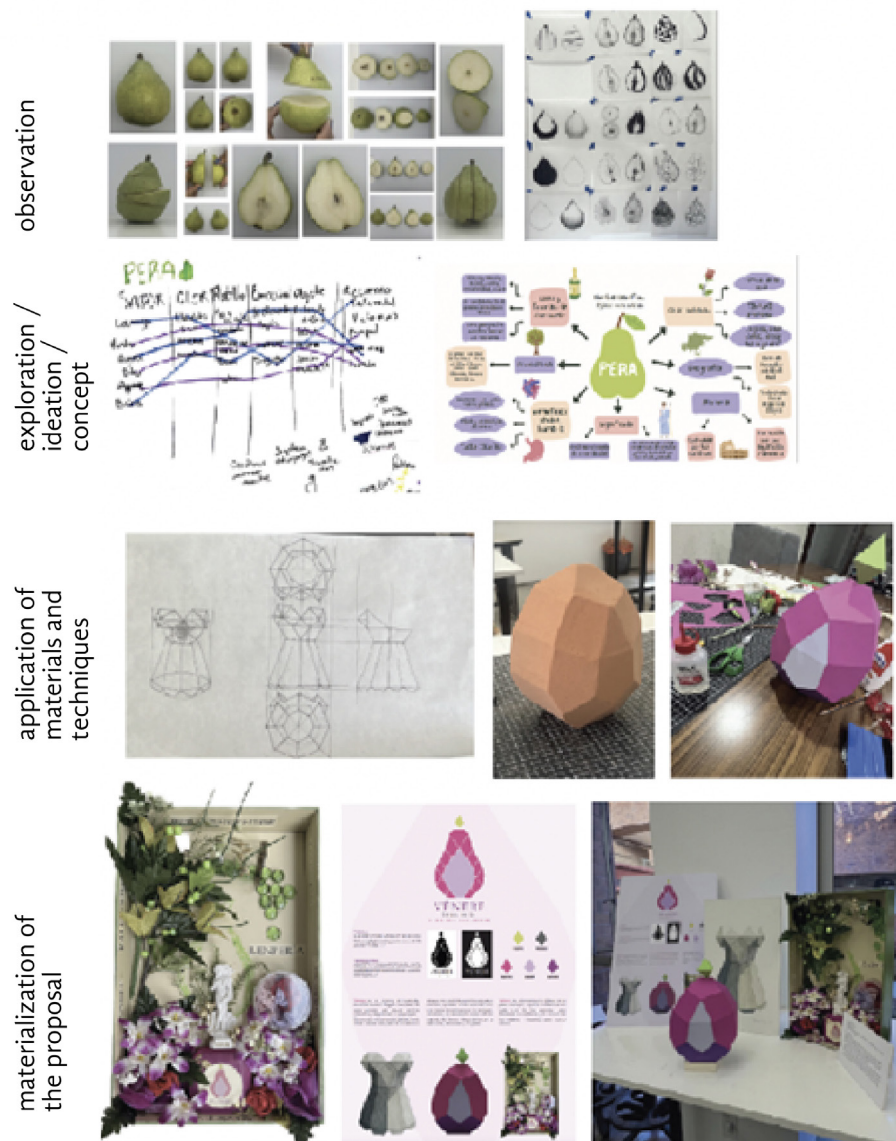


Figure 7. Faceted workshop  
Source: Jorge Benítez, 2023.

For its part, the Volumes workshop focuses on the elaboration of a fantastic animal, emphasizing the tactile, including a fanzine, and adding pictographic elements, in addition to integrating knowledge of G0, G1 and G2 volumes, as shown in Figure 8. Andrea explains: "I learned things I didn't know how to do, like changing organic figures to geometric ones, distinguishing different types of pictograms and their purposes, making a drawing in perspective using vanishing points." (Garza, 2023, p. 20).

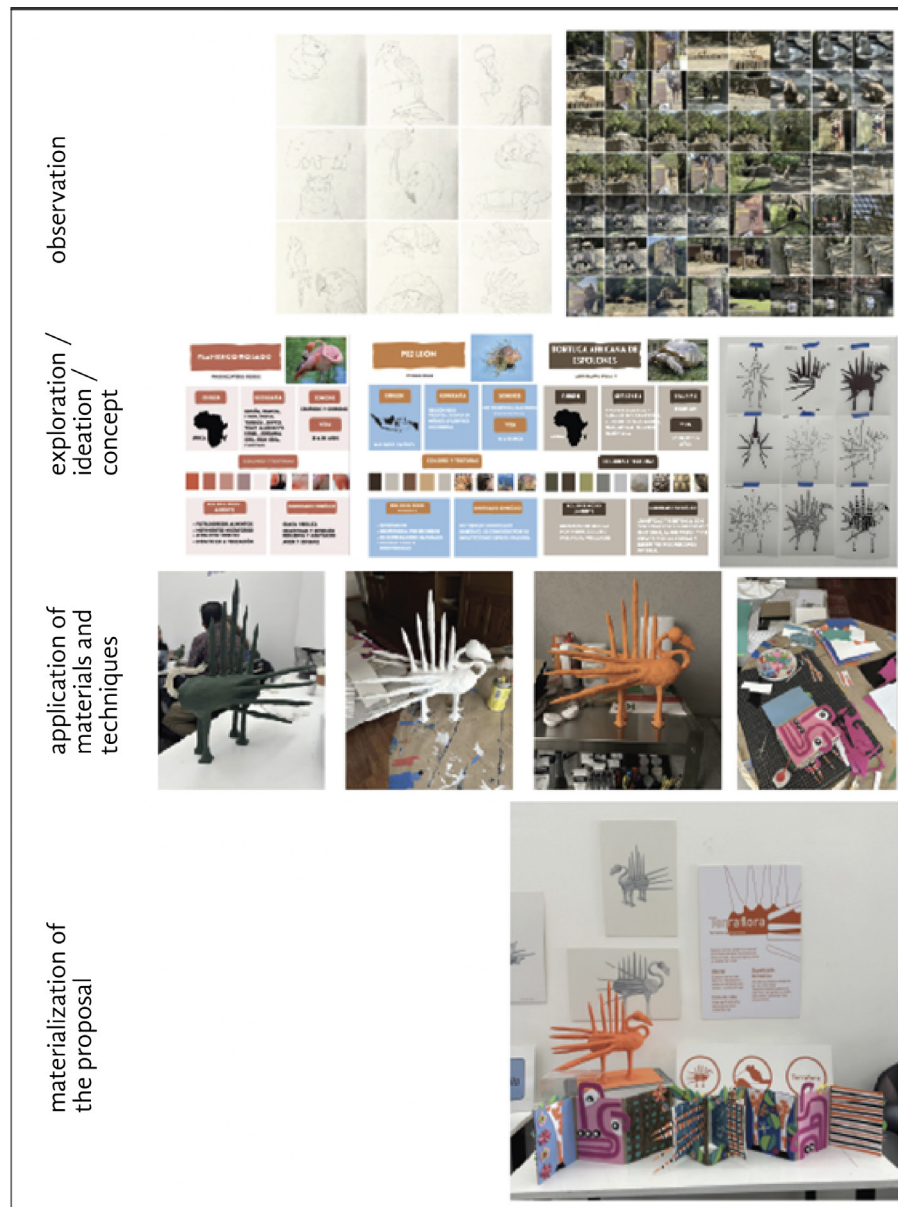


Figure 8. Volumes workshop  
Source: Andrea Garza, 2023.

In the last workshop, the realization of the initials of each student is exposed, in addition to including digital image teachings and generating a scenario for these elements, integrating the sense of hearing. In this case only the final proposal is presented. According to Horacio, the project was "Complex, but with a lot of creative freedom that allowed me to translate my ideas into physical form." (Gómez, 2023, n.p.).

materialization of  
the proposal



Figure 9. *Surfaces workshop*  
Source: Horacio Gómez, 2023.

**Conclusions** It is recognized that going from graphic design to sensory design is a new field. It is a very broad perspective that allows going beyond the visual and understanding the multisensory system in relation to the person. This opens the possibility of exploring new ways of connecting, which implies reflecting on, addressing and understanding the impact of design in current times and its significant contribution to society.

As such, the opening of the degree in Sensory Design and Creative Direction is a bet and response to new scenarios. Although the changes have managed to provide students with the skills required in current times, the task has not been easy and has represented a challenge from its implementation to date, particularly for teachers. Therefore, since its opening, adjustments and reflections have been made according to successes and opportunity gaps. Undoubtedly, it is an opportunity for innovation and creativity in teaching and learning. And the perception of academics goes in that direction, as it is generally positive, although areas for improvement are also highlighted, such as coordination between teachers.

From the works, the potential of this new educational proposal is shown. There is still a long way to go, especially on issues related to technology, neurosciences, and social behaviors in relation to the human being, which go beyond the visual and allow generating experiences, services and products that contribute to their well-being. Therefore, it is essential

to carry out continuous reviews and adjustments to reach its maximum potential, in order to contribute significantly to the discipline of design.

Thus, it is important to understand that design in current contexts must have a constant stance in exploring its praxis so that it gives us a reading of our current and changing environment, and offers us a demand of our times on current phenomena. This requires having knowledge and responsibility about the impact that design causes in our daily living. ●

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### About the author

*María del Mar Sanz Abbud*

Doctor in Design from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, with a master's degree in Strategic Design in Innovation from Universidad Iberoamericana CDMX and a bachelor's degree in Graphic Design from the same university. First place in the Research Award on Civil Society, Doctoral Thesis category, by the Mexican Center for Philanthropy (Cemefi), in 2017, and honorable mention in Diseña México. She has been teaching since 2003 and has been part of the full-time faculty at Universidad Iberoamericana since 2010. In the professional field, she has worked at Banamex and in 2006 collaborated with the Citizen Institute for Studies on Insecurity to generate a citizen support proposal on the topic of prevention in public security. From these professional experiences arose her interest in research on Civil Society Organizations and visual communication processes. At Universidad Iberoamericana, she coordinated the Graphic Design degree, the Coordination of Linkage Projects in the Design Department and was in charge of the Alumni and Professional Development Direction, as well as the Student and Alumni Attention Direction. Currently, she participates as a reviewer in research journals; collaborates with Encuadre, Mexican Association of Graphic Design Schools and with Cemefi. She has offered conferences and publications in national and international journals and her research line focuses on third sector organizations, graphic design and strategies for visual communication.



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