

CERAMICS AND HABITAT. A POTENTIAL STRATEGY FOR CERAMIC SECTOR COMPANIES



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ABSTRACT

*Through this encounter, in the framework of QUALICER, it is intended to reflect on the opportunity for ceramic sector companies to differentiate themselves and to increase the added value by focusing their **products** on the environment in which the potential product users conduct their activity. This will require addressing ceramic design from the global perspective of the habitat of which it is a part, letting the user's voice be heard in this process, and establishing possible cooperative alliances with other companies that pursue their activities and develop their products for this environment. In the panel debate, the opinions and experiences of entrepreneurs from sectors that supply these markets, designers of spaces, and researchers will provide an overview from which to draw our own conclusions.*



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

Nowadays it seems unquestionable that in the ceramic industry the growth model based on increasing productivity is beginning to show signs of exhaustion. The analysis of experts and observations of the business market, and the way markets and essentially the products on offer are evolving, indicate that opting for product/service differentiation is one possible way of ensuring our industries stay competitive.

In effect, we appear to be irreversibly entering a “perverse sequence” of uncertain outcome, given that:

1. In such a localized and competitive market, with such accessible technology, companies tend to imitate one another more and more and consequently they all resemble one another.
2. Behaving in this way makes the products on offer homogenous.
3. If the products on offer are homogenous, the only choice factor for the consumer is price, which is subject to constant pressure.
4. We cannot compete with third world countries on the basis of price so.....
5. ... (at best...) companies can no longer grow by manufacturing more of the same. They can only grow by differentiating themselves and generating products/services that the consumer is prepared to pay for.

Generally speaking, the ceramic sector has a track record of applying technology development, and maintaining standards of excellence in its production and management. It is an essential factor in achieving this much sought differentiation and ensuring the possibility of competing in a global market. But now we are concerned to see that the changes in the world of technology are even faster than purely economic changes and

this is not just a defence mechanism against developing countries, but a response to the very speed with which these countries gain access to new technologies.

In addition, the economic indicators associated with the construction hypersector, to which the ceramics sector has traditionally dedicated a major share of its business activity, indicate that this really has peaked. The “anything goes because the product sells itself” assumption is becoming an imaginative sequence of persuasive arguments used by property developers and builders, at a time when offering differentiated value to homes and incorporating the consumer’s emotional preferences are factors that are beginning to take priority when designing products.

The detection of trends in social and cultural habits (Democratization, design tendencies, Well-being Environments, Reduction of living space, New family models, etc.) and in the products and services offered by the market (Customization and co-creation, prefabricated homes, Integral solutions, etc.) allow us to take a chance on windows of business opportunity where we can progress. But there is no doubt that changes in focus are important, given current trends. Shall we give it a try?

1.2. A POSSIBLE APPROACH: FOCUSING ON THE HABITAT

HABITAT:a combination of material and institutional factors that determine the existence of a localized human population. In architecture: the conditions which the organization and arrangement of the interior space of a residential or functional building offers to its inhabitants...

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One of the current strategies detected in economic and market trend analysis is the presence in numerous sectors of Integral solutions, which are defined as the grouping of a range of products/services as a joint entity under an umbrella concept or brand philosophy.

There are several examples: Carrefour and all its associated business interests under one roof, what started as EasyJet and is now EasyEVERYTHING, etc...

It is significant that what we are referring to is happening in all sectors of the habitat in general. If we concentrate on this concept of habitat, which, as a start, we have only explored in terms of communication, it becomes increasingly relevant in relation to product distribution. Thus there has been a very sharp increase in the number of distribution outlets that offer the consumer practically any element for equipping the home, although there is still a distinction between outlets which have traditionally concentrated on furniture and have extended their product range to include decoration elements, household goods and furnishings, and household textiles, and those which were based on building materials and expanded into kitchens and bathrooms.

Also producers, especially in the furniture sector, are beginning to make series of decoration and household textile products, not as complements to their furniture but as a way of offering habitats to the consumer.

Similarly, the celebration of promotion events and trade fairs which view the habitat as an indivisible space with all its own components is relevant here. Many top-level international fairs, and Casa Pasarela, the various Casa Decor exhibitions and other events in Spain, show how important the habitat concept is becoming nowadays.

As a communication strategy **ceramic products** have always been associated with the context they were designed for. The adaptation of the product to a specific space in the home, both at stands and in catalogues, has become familiar to us. With regard to market distribution, ceramics have been more or less closely linked to bathroom and kitchen furniture.

At other levels some successful ceramic companies have started to offer multi-products for these spaces, but still focusing essentially on the bathroom and kitchen.

However, if a company takes this connection between ceramics and habitat one step further, it means the company has to plan its strategy from the perspective of generating **all the physical and also emotional elements of the habitat**, rather than conceiving the ceramic product as merely one more element to be included as an afterthought.

Spaces and the habitat as a whole are changeable and capricious. Anatxu Zabalbeascoa from EPS complains: *"Houses learn, adapt, become personalized. Time is required to achieve this. And nowadays we are almost as short of time as we are of space..."* And everything is becoming terribly ephemeral and provisional, as a result of the new lifestyle models. *"The home for an entire lifespan no longer exists"* the architect Blanca Lleo from Madrid proclaims in her book *Informe Habitar*.

We are witnessing an extremely creative and constructive time for the habitat and the ways in which the consumer interacts with his surroundings. The search for the emotionality of objects has acquired prominence. In other words, as well as having functional qualities, an object must afford well-being and recreation, and must surprise and excite us. Also, from the point of view of responsibility towards the consumer, society and the environment, objects must be designed in accordance with how they are going to be used. If products that are easy to use and safe, and convey a sense of well-being, are generated then we can talk about Accessibility and Universal Design. The life cycle of products needs to be programmed from the point of view of sustainability and this way energetically self-sufficient buildings are designed.

Knowledge of the consumer will constitute the starting point for generating a habitat proposed by the strategy that is presented and which aims to increase the added value of the ceramic product.

This habitat proposal for ceramics must be on closer terms with the user. It must know how he lives, what his interests, values and preferences are, and how he relates to others.

In this overall vision, in which each product forms part of the habitat, interacting and complementing the other elements and systems it is made up of, it is essential to plan-design, distribute and communicate a ceramic product from the perspective that it is not an entity which is isolated from the rest of the elements in the home or its surroundings, and it therefore interacts and engages with other elements in the living space.

1.3. INTERSECTORAL COOPERATION - INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

When approaching this business model companies can opt to go it alone until they manage to develop an integral range of products and services. However, the combined influence of the times in which we live and market driving forces do not appear to favour success by such a difficult route.

It seems more logical for a step of such magnitude to involve the formation of strategic alliances with companies and businesses from other sectors who act as suppliers for these markets. In this way the synergy derived from pooled know-how can to a large extent help companies to advance more rapidly and with less risk.

At a time when the gurus of the advanced tertiary sector are warning us that survival will involve consolidating innovation as a competitive tool, the establishment of cooperative strategies with selected partners could be a good solution. This will mean sustainable innovation, which is so important at the moment, and it must not compromise what we can do in the future.

Intersectoral cooperation is of vital importance in the realization of habitat projects. The combined experience, resources and knowledge of each sector, ranging from manufacturing processes to communication and distribution through specific channels, contribute to ensuring the habitat project has optimum repercussions in the market and really reaches the consumer.

For their part, and on another level, some of these sectors, such as the furniture or household textile sector, have had to undergo a process of re-adaptation to the reality of the market that has affected their development in order to ensure their survival. Undoubtedly, familiarization with their experience and their reality might be very useful to the ceramic sector in order to prevent or lessen the impact of the possible situations of uncertainty we are beginning to see signs of in the near future.

We might also mention that some companies in the ceramic sector have been conducting projects and making products in collaboration with producers of furniture and accessories, whose goal is to offer living spaces.

This is the case for TAU, which by means of its ULAT project, conducted jointly with PuntMobles and with the collaboration of several complementary habitat companies, exhibited a complete apartment designed functionally and emotionally for the “new singles” or LATs (Living Apart Together) at the CASA PASARELA 2006 exhibition, combining concepts from new social models with the virtues of the Mediterranean, Sustainable and Bioclimatic home. This is a space in which advanced home automation technology integrated with the décor and ensured Accessibility via principles of Universal Design.

The presence of companies like Saloni, Azuvi and TAU itself, amongst others, at CASA PASARELA 2007 denotes an approximation towards the world of the habitat and the integral solution.

The sector is also making an effort to generate the know-how that will make it possible to advance down this road. The DRAC project led by ASCER, which sought to incorporate consumers’ perceptions into the detection of development opportunities for ceramic products, or the current Singular Strategic Four Senses Project, which aims to study the physical and emotional mechanisms behind interactions between users and their habitat, and how they can be applied in the design of new ceramic materials, are examples of such initiatives.

Along similar lines, the Market Observatory, with its focus on knowing the consumer, and the Habitat Trends Observatory have been set up, under the responsibility of ITC (Institute of Ceramic Technology) and in collaboration with the

Technology Institutes linked to the furniture and textile sectors, AIDIMA and AITEX. This is a multi-sectoral project which aims to serve as a system for generating and reporting knowledge related to the study of the evolution of the habitat itself, the sociocultural factors which influence it and its distribution and communication in the marketplace.



In short, we find ourselves faced with possibilities, opportunities and effort based on a line of reasoning which could be one of the future development strategies for the ceramic sector.

It will be worth it if we make an effort to try and understand it better.