Product Design for the Developing World is a collaborative course between Universidad Rafael Landivar, CALTECH and Art Center College of Design students. The aim of the course is to design products for more than the 2 billion people around the world who exist on less than $2.00 a day, specifically people living in Guatemala. For the PDDW for 2009, we took an extensive research trip across Guatemala, as part of the immersion and in depth research process needed to conduct the projects. The trip took us along the rural parts of Guatemala around the town of Antigua and around Lake Atitlan, where there are around 12 rural local communities scattered.

After weeks of working via skype and videoconferences, we finally met our partners from CALTECH and the Art Center, when they arrived in Guatemala City, August 17. We spend our first day of the trip in Guatemala City, where the students from Caltech and the Art Center got acquainted with our lifestyles and had a brief look around the city. The students where then taken to a visit to the Ixchel Museum (a traditional costume museum) and then they where taken to the Universidad Rafael Landivar Campus, where we had lunch and an introductory session, as we got to know each other. After some time bonding and getting to know each other, we all had dinner at a local restaurant. The morning after we left for Antigua, stopping by at some of the work sites and gathering the preliminary information for our project. We went to El Tejar, a town in Chimaltenango where they work with tiles and mud bricks, after some time spent there we all traveled to TPS (Teconologia para la Salud), where we saw some wood burning stove, composting latrines, water pumps and a small orchard; they have the ability to adapt simple technological concepts into their daily lives and improve them. From there we traveled to Parramos, to the small family owned shoe shop. Here they mostly produced industrial shoes with either steel or plastic toes. Although they have a very small monthly production they have excellent craftsmanship and are able to produce up to 300 pairs of shoes daily.

After spending the night in Antigua, we left for Lago Atitlan; on our way we visited two local markets, the market in Solola and the market in Panajachel. Although very different from each other both markets are the meeting places of the town and the center for the economic activities. Here local and other producers from the adjoining regions take their goods (food, clothes, shoes, novelty items, etc) and sell them. It is not only an economic transaction the one that goes on in the markets but also a cultural and social, in which people converge to discuss daily matters and problems. That night was spent camping lakeside Lake Atitlan, at Luzmi’s house, where we enjoyed the weather and view of the Lake. The morning after we went to visit the community where PDDW worked last year, Pasajquim, a very impoverished community high in the mountains that surround Lake Atitlan. Here the community had an irrigation system that helped them with
their crops, however the main problem (the owning of the land) had not been solved. They also tested a corn Sheller and a water filter, and both of the product faced difficulties, one of the biggest one was changing people's customs and traditions with two revolutionary products; this is one of the biggest problems faced when a new product comes to change the people's lives. As we left Pasajquim after lunch we visited the town of San Pedro la Laguna, by the water's edge. There we visited Casa Sueños, a local store where they work with leather goods producing shoes, handbags, belts and wallets and although it is all handcrafted by the locals, it is evident the designs of the products are not from Guatemala at all, instead they look native American.

After spending two days by the lake, we went back to Antigua, where each group spent 3 days visiting their workshops, doing field research and getting to know Antigua and it's surrounding areas. On our first day around the shoe workshop we had a tour of the small work space they have and Arnulfo, the owner of the place walked us through the shoe making process and it's detailed workmanship. During this process we saw the amount of detail they put into producing a pair of shoes, their ability to recreate any shoe style the client wants just by taking a look at a sketch or picture and despite their poor background and small workspace the amount of modern machinery they have bought along the years. This family owned company has a long story in the business and has endured many hardships over the past years; it went from being a highly successful company (at one time they had 74 employees) to being a company in which only family members work. While working and visiting the workshop we began discussing some of their pressing needs: the creation of a brand name, logo and image, diversifying their products (product lines) and increasing their monthly production. Their desire to work together as a team was remarkable and encouraged us to help them out.

The overall research/trip experience was great; I enjoyed not only getting to know our working teams for the project but also getting to travel around my country and getting to know our workshops. There are however a couple of things that if done differently might have helped with the experience. Taking our ideas and suggestions (being Guatemalans we know how our country works) into consideration would have saved us from some of the unplanned or chaotic parts of the trip. I would have also liked our teammates to have more free time in order to enjoy other aspects of Guatemalan life and not just the rural impoverished areas. Some ideas and room for improvement would have been to establish 3 or 4 restaurants or places to eat and allow each one of us to decide where to go to, as long as there was also a meeting place and time established, to get back. I would have also included some one on one sessions with Ken, Luzmi and Ovidio to get more in-depth information and ideas on the projects we where working on instead of having group
meetings for hours on end. Another suggestion for the next project research trip would be to pick the subjects we are to be working on once the students are here in Guatemala, after the first day in Guatemala we found out some of the problems we thought we could solve, where actually not problems at all. The trip overall was a very positive, rewarding experience, in which we as Guatemalans got closer to the reality of our country and the Caltech and Art Center students got to see how the rural areas in Guatemala live, their culture and lifestyle.