

Bridging Design Education and a Portuguese Handicraft Tradition – Pedagogical Experimentation through Design for Doing

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Abstract

The following paper develops an educational project with theoretical and practical research on the historical and semantic capital of graphic design, materialized in a pedagogical experience that articulated the contemporary interpretation of the visual discourse of graphic design with the study and recognition of the historical and semantic capital of Portuguese 'Teceragem de Almalaguês' (weaving of Almalaguês) tradition, in its historical and sociocultural contexts. Almalaguês is a small parish near Coimbra, in Central Portugal, whose hand-weaving technique, named under the same, is possibly dating back to the eleventh century.

Integrated in the degree (BA) in Graphic Design of the School of Design of the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, this project interprets an educative insight that introduces traditional manufacturing industries and techniques to future generations of designers, which may aid in their continuation in future contexts. To do so, we identify the technical and production evolution of its patterns, layouts and materials, projecting contemporaneously these values and concepts as a motto for creativity in design higher education curriculum, namely focusing in packaging design.

This learning experience created an opportunity to engage with the ongoing Research Project AntiAmnesia, a founded project that aims at performing a design research mediation process towards the sustenance of traditional industries and practices in the Northern and Central regions of Portugal. It focuses on identity, traditions, knowledge and economic viability and its actions comprise ethnography, archiving, design practices, and media and business strategies.

The educational project was implemented in three moments of development, from research, to creative development and conclusion. Starting from the study and knowledge of the visual communication history of this traditional handicraft, the project evolves in creative terms for a new interpretation of its products, working "concepts" as primary organizers. The opportunity created to combine a creative research project with the practical experimentation in an intergenerational and interdisciplinary workshop, allowing interactions between students and artisans/workers, leading to networking and know-how transfer. This workshop allowed the students to develop creative reasoning and stimulation, understanding in situ, and with the artisans, formal and physical details of Almalaguês.

Keywords: *Design Education, Almalaguês, AntiAmnesia, Design for doing.*

1. Design pedagogy and its relevance to sustaining traditional creative industries

Design's role towards the continuity of historically significant but antiquated traditional practices involves gaining a greater visibility of emerging strategies that are being employed in response to real-world issues concerning heritage management. Traditional techniques and practices existing within particular cultural landscapes inevitably face situations of flux due to constantly shifting socio-economic and sociocultural paradigms. Thus, hands-on approaches to safeguarding associated identities, legacies and viabilities provide most relevant examples of reformative action in critical cases.

In consideration of this motto, the following paper presents a project-based pedagogic initiative that acknowledges the historical and semantic capital associated with the millenary Portuguese hand-weaving tradition of *Almalaguês* through making a contemporary interpretation of its visual discourse by means of graphic design. The initiative bases its actions on theoretical and practical research by undergraduate students of graphic design conducted with the practice community in order to arrive at tangible outputs that target particular aspects of the dissipating craft for melioration. Within this holistic perspective, one of the areas identified as a key area of improvement is packaging design, an aspect of the craft which has not been given sufficient importance by the makers traditionally, but one which can greatly influence the craft's perceived value and project its unique narrative to markets and



audiences beyond the typical bastions. In conjunction the graphic design students explore visual and artistic elements in *Almalaguês's* visual narrative in order to develop packaging design concepts for both conventional and innovative handwoven products that promote / reflect upon the embedded historical and cultural significance of the practice.

2. Collaboration with project Anti-Amnesia

This academic initiative was organised under the ambit of the project “Anti-Amnesia: design research as an agent for narrative and material regeneration and reinvention of vanishing Portuguese manufacturing cultures and techniques”, a research initiative that is co-financed by Portugal 2020, alongside the European Regional Development Fund and the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal (ID+/Unexpected Media Lab: POCI-01-0145-FEDER-029022; 2018-2020). The project seeks to recover material, human and social narratives surrounding traditional Portuguese industries facing various degrees of obsolescence. It seeks to re-inscribe and re-purpose the gathered knowledge towards sustaining associated identities, customs and practices.

In accordance, the research focuses on a consistent reversion of outcomes into multiple contexts of socio-cultural appropriation through a “build-measure-learn” loop. A significant extent of this is achieved by means of curricular participation by design students from partnering academic institutions, who engage directly with project objectives through an array of pedagogical undertakings. These include design and ethnography related workshops with communities of practice; supporting the compilation and archiving of source materials; building and maintaining the project’s online presence; and supporting broadcasting activities on community radio and other public / private platforms.

3. Case Study — Almalaguês

Among the initiative’s core case studies is *Almalaguês*, a craft industry of handwoven textiles from the region of Coimbra, estimated to be in practice since the late Eleventh Century. Mainly used for producing durable tapestry and bedding material, the craft’s subtle aesthetics belie its distinction as a unique cultural landscape. However, due to modern day commercial challenges, *Almalaguês* is facing significant difficulties in terms of market / maker retention and viability, leading to a steady decline and an uncertain future beyond the current generation of active practitioners. Based on preliminary research [1] [2] [3] [4], it is evident that without inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary collaborations, and inputs on design, technology and modern entrepreneurship, the ageing community of surviving artisans is unlikely to be able to cope with the commercial realities of present-day business. The project accordingly aims to introduce the tools and means through design-driven activities, including pedagogical interventions, which these makers can utilise towards effectively re-calibrating their skills, extending market scope, and protecting their identity and traditions, knowledge, and economic viability.

The project was accordingly framed to study and recognise the associated historical and semantic capital with the objective of attaining design-driven outputs that endorse the arcane contemporaneity of the practice for use in future contexts of design and creativity. The objective was to articulate a strategy for requalifying and re-evaluating communication related aspects of this ancient practice alongside contemporary design education.

The project AntiAmnesia distances itself from certain contemporary exercises that apply re-branding templates to traditional products in indiscriminate manner. It instead proposes to aid in capacity building for the struggling industries and crafts, and encourages practitioners to define their own narratives, communication parameters and means to self-actualize. It utilizes design education in this regard to address real-world issues through project-based pedagogy where in the practice communities are assisted with the said re-calibration of their skills for addressing contemporary challenges, and the students gain from engaging in unconventional impact-driven design and research scenarios.

In this respect, a key area of intervention relates to designing packaging material for traditional handloom products that *Almalaguês* weavers produce, including various wraps and clothing accessories, small stationary items like notebook jackets, pouches and purses, and to a lesser extent, bagpipe covers. Typically, the weaving community has not placed any significant interest or importance on packaging, however, in modern-day retail, packaging design is imperative and a critical component of promotion that corresponds to the associated product’s / brand’s core values, philosophies and sense of aesthetics. Other packaging-related elements like collaterals are access points to vital information regarding the product and its upkeep, and together they work to procure favorable perception from prospective clients.

In the case of *Almalaguês*, its deep-rooted historical/cultural significance and unique materiality stands to be showcased and gain a wider outreach through incorporating packaging design as an articulated strategy for communication. The project was thereby formulated to consider both the overall material / visual context of the craft and the physicality of typical *Almalaguês* products towards developing potential solutions. In addition, the students were also encouraged to develop packaging design concepts for hypothetical articles made from the handloom textile, in order to envision new territories for implementation.

4. Developing objectives and methodology

Integrated in the BA degree in Graphic design at the School of Design, Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, the project introduced *Almalaguês*'s tradition and techniques of hand-making to a generation of future designers who may potentially contribute to sustaining the craft through their future practice.

At their current phase of formation, the pedagogic intervention presented real-world learning and application experience to the graphic design students, expanding their academic environments beyond standard classrooms. In relation, the project identifies its main objectives as:

- To explore the grammar of communication design towards sustaining associated identities, traditions and practices
- Correspondingly, to develop creative reasoning and stimulation in design based on the history of visual communication and the praxis of contemporary graphic design, creating an opportunity to experiment with different graphics technologies and ways of thinking
- To adapt the aesthetic objectives of the design to the effective — methodological, technical and productive — possibilities of the graphic production, discovering through practice, and with sense of experience, the limitations and potentialities associated with traditional production processes;
- To strengthen the capacity for argumentation and grounding in all phases of the project
- To develop critical thinking skills in relation to different design perspectives, their historical course as an expression of graphic and visual communication and the tangencies they can achieve.

5. Phases of Implementation

The project was implemented in three phases, namely, research, creative development, and conclusion. The students were required to create a graphic document showcasing a packaging design concept for a particular handloom textile-based product of their choosing from *Tecelagem de Almalaguês*. Starting with a study of the historical and cultural inscription of this traditional craft, a corresponding stage of interpretation and graphic design was realized to conceptualize the dichotomy of “present / future” in relation to the craft’s potential vis-à-vis its present standing.

During the methodological component corresponding to the phase concerning analysis and interpretation of the creative challenge, a workshop on the theme of “design for doing” was conducted, enabling the students to engage directly with researchers from the project Anti-Amnesia, alongside eight weavers from *Almalaguês*, who shared their experiences and insights.

This workshop entitled “*Among the lines of Tecelagem de Almalaguês*” was significant for the opportunity it created for the students to interact with primary sources of information, including the original makers and creative research investigators who form an essential part of the efforts pertaining to the conservation and sustenance of this craft. The workshop accordingly allowed:

1. To gain informed perspectives on related traditions, techniques and products
2. To gain a first-hand experience of working on handloom in the manner of *Almalaguês* weaving
3. To gather and comprehend the human and social narratives surrounding the craft from the personal stories and anecdotes of the invited weavers.

Respectively, it became possible, even in this initial stage of the project, to develop conditions for a pedagogic activity that could profoundly influence the students’ creative motivations and approaches further on.

During the corresponding phase the study and implementation of components and elements in relation to graphic design was realised. In compliance with the proposed methodology, this stage of ideation consisted of planning, material selection and exploratory tests. As stated earlier, the project introduced an additional factor — to develop a packaging design solution for a new conceptual *Almalaguês* product in addition to an existing one.

The final phase required the students to construct a prototype in conjunction with the explained objectives and as a culmination of the overall exercise. It included a product photography session

before the final delivery of the outputs. The students were also asked to maintain visual records of their creative process for inclusion as a systematised delineation for review in their final reports and documents.

6. Results and outputs

The synergy that was eventually created between the various involved entities, including students, artisans and researchers, became central to realising the project's primary expectations. Its implementation structure allowed for a conducive execution time frame for the undergraduate students to acquire and act upon specialised knowledge.

From a majority of the produced concepts, it was possible to observe a push towards exploratory development, where in specific elements of the craft were picked up to ascertain their underlying potential for reinterpretation in contemporary or conceptual contexts. In this manner, the traditional scope of graphic design had been breached to include parallel territories of reflection with respect to creative practice.

Future work will include the production of a select set of projects in a letterpress printing studio, with the anticipation of promoting a dialogue of interest between two disappearing traditional industrial practices. This will be concluded as a part of the associated research project Anti-Amnesia's mission to advocate design research as a critical agent for reactivating social, economic, and material narratives surrounding a variety of similarly vanishing Portuguese manufacturing cultures and techniques.

References

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