



Active Pedagogy in Art and Design Education – Case Study on the Heritage and Semantics of the Portuguese Graphic Tradition of ‘Azulejos’

Jorge Brandão Pereira¹, Heitor Alvelos², Abhishek Chatterjee³

Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave / ID+ Research Institute for Design, Media and Culture,
Portugal¹

University of Porto / ID+ Research Institute for Design, Media and Culture, Portugal^{2,3}

Abstract

The following paper acknowledges multidisciplinary connections enabled by media to communicate the symbolic and historical value of the Portuguese tradition of tiles on facades, particularly in the city of Porto. It is developed within the context of Anti-Amnesia (POCI- 01-0145-FEDER-029022), a design research project that seeks to sustain disappearing traditional industries and practices in northern and central Portugal. The educational resources that are built focus on writing and reflecting upon the pedagogical activities themselves, in the form of scientific contributions to the higher education community involved in art and design. The tiles (Azulejos, in Portuguese) have been a defining feature of Portuguese architecture for centuries, but the practice has steeply declined in scale and authenticity with the advent of more mechanized alternatives. Acknowledging this heritage, the research is framed around the study and recognition of the associated historical and semantic capital. - The research is further aided in understanding the related socio-cultural contexts by a Porto based entity “Gazete Azulejos” who aim to create a digital archive of original Azulejos designs in the city. The project sees such ligations with on-ground interventions based on contemporary design and communication as viable grounds for revaluation and resurgence of traditional forms of creativity.

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. This guideline bridges with an educational insight: digital media and digital archives, properly organized and made available for public domain, allow for necessary conditions to investigate the selected case-study. The paper thus describes a pedagogic project developed with undergraduate students of graphic design outlining the conducted research, creative development, and learnings. The paper discusses how such case-based integration invites the rethinking of design instruction itself, acting according to the perceptions of the contexts, interpretation of various dynamics, and experiences of the students. The opportunity to combine a creative research project with the cultural heritage of an urban territory also allows learning-based interactions between students, artists, activists and local culture, leading to intergenerational and interdisciplinary networking and know-how transfer.

Keywords: Art and design education; higher education; Portugal; Azulejos.

1. Introduction

Project Anti-Amnesia (POCI-01-0145-FEDER-029022) is a design research project that seeks to sustain disappearing traditional industries and practices in Northern and Central Portugal [1], conducting design-led research interventions and educational strategies that focuses on securing and sustaining systems of traditional knowledge and intangible value prospects embedded in craft and small scale industrial practices. Under these circumstances, it identifies the heritage and semantics of the Portuguese graphic tradition of ‘Azulejos’ as a case study that conforms to the aforementioned assessment, and consequently, procures means for constructing an evidential base that can potentially aid in its cultural appraisal and reactivation.

2. A pedagogical model: Anti-Amnesia

The project’s conducted research sees an ongoing reversion of its outcomes into multiple contexts of related socio-cultural appropriation through a “build-measure-learn” loop, a significant extent of which is attained by the means of curricular participation from design students. The student participants engage directly with the project’s subjects and objectives through an array of impact-focused



workshops and curricular work, including design ethnography and supporting multi-disciplinary actions relating to the recovery and restoration of heritage and visual semantics.

Integrated in the process of higher education in graphic design, within the structuring domain of design project, the pedagogical process identifies as main objectives: (i) to explore the grammar of communication design; (ii) to identify attitudes and methods used in the design environment. (iii) to adapt the aesthetic objectives of design to the effective possibilities – methodological, technical and productive – of graphic production; (iv) to develop reasoning and creative stimulation in a project, embodied in the history of visual communication and in the praxis of contemporary graphic design; and finally (v) to develop the capacity for critical thinking in relation to the different perspectives of Design, their role in society and tangencies.

By these objectives, one does not just try to solve the problem, it is also deliberate to try to improve the educational activity. In this type of research and project development, one is not only concerned with interpreting the presented situation but simultaneously with changing the situation and the educational actors. For students, this learning based engagement with real world scenarios adds two substantive vectors: it is a formative, contextualized, reflective and collaborative learning experience in the construction of knowledge and design practice; and it is a transformative experience, as it involves itself in these real world scenarios and in their experience. The synergy that was eventually created between the various involved entities, including students, artisans and researchers, became central to realizing the project's primary expectations. Its implementation structure allowed for a conducive execution time frame for the undergraduate students to acquire and act upon specialized knowledge.

3. The Portuguese graphic tradition of 'Azulejos'

Portugal's well-known 'Azulejos' tiles are in a state of flux. The original hand-printed version of the practice may have long ceded ground to more mechanized forms; however, its legacy, marked by century-old artefacts that still adorn building facades, is disintegrating rapidly. As urban centers such as Porto expand and accept newer architectural paradigms, *azulejos*, a cultural archetype from an earlier era, transforms into a thematic discourse. The symbolic value of the craft, as a cultural marker, thus gains more significance than its material and processual heritage.

Project Anti-Amnesia thus lays particular emphasis on gaining visibility of emergent actions that are being employed from within the wider creative community towards issue. Traditional techniques and practices are inevitably affected by the inconsistent economic and sociocultural circumstances; however, it is often possible to locate endogenous movements that undertake reformatory measures.



Fig. 1 The stolen tiles from Porto's facades make a striking argument for the enduring value of originality.



The active pedagogy involved collaborating with 'Gazete Azulejos', an initiative the project considers as a relevant subject of study towards gaining an understanding of the tradition of tile making in Porto, as its aim is to revive and sustain the authenticity factor behind the original craft in the absence of a dedicated community of practice. Consequently, the Porto-based initiative represents the sole instance of an entity that is currently involved in the production of hand-painted tiles, in any capacity, in a city that was once home to several tile-producing kilns, the last of which ceased to operate in the 1980s [2].



Fig. 2 Azulejos' patterns (sample) retrieved from Porto buildings, archived at www.instagram.com/azulejosporto/

As a result of its restorative measures, the initiative represents an intervention scenario which not only promotes active community-based creative engagement with a heritage craft and its associated concerns but also communicates the undiminished value of a local traditional practice to a global audience. Its three-pronged strategy for cultural reconsideration essentially includes design, documentation, and dissemination: as a methodological approach, this falls in line with Anti-Amnesia's articulations.

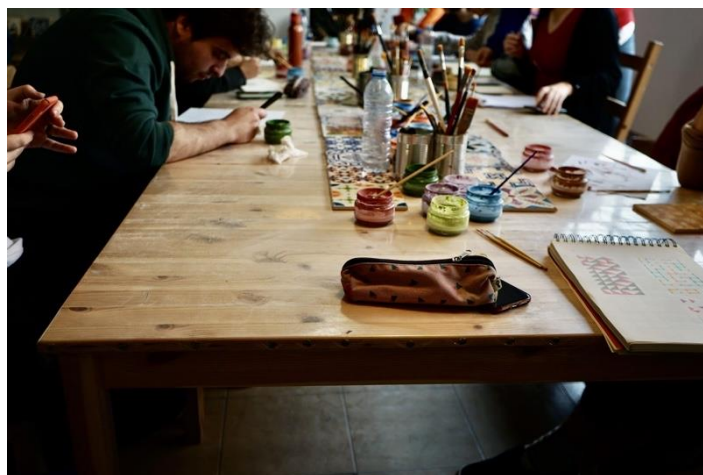


Fig. 3 Workshops provided by 'Os Azulejos do Porto' entail a communal call to action.

Integrated in the degree (BA) in Graphic Design of the School of Design of the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, the collaborative pedagogic undertaking with Gazete Azulejos (under ambit of project Anti-Amnesia) interprets an educative insight that introduces the heritage and semantics of Azulejos tilemaking to a future generation of designers, which may aid in the continuation of the associated creative and processual legacy in future contexts. Although there is a great heterogeneity in the graphic language of the student's projects, in most of the works developed there is a concern for exploration and creative experimentation, in trying to validate specific skills tied to different areas of



their curricular structure. By exploring and discussing the bases of design, the exercises present a wide range of creative possibilities through graphic design, exploring the limits of the discipline in parallel with a reflections on its methodological grounding. The students were also invited to explore the digital archive being built by Gazete Azulejos, towards gaining a first-hand understanding of how contemporary design and communication can help preserve and promote intangible values embedded in traditional creative techniques and practices.. The creative briefing additionally urged the students to recognize the specific potential of three-dimensionality for the conceptualization of a graphic message – the dichotomy of “expected / unexpected”.

The overall results corresponded to expectations, with a number of responses distinctly showcasing quality and applicability. The structuring and organization of the project in different phases supported by the methodological model provided conditions conducive to enhancing the students' creative capacities and motivations.

4. Discussion

The integration of research projects, with design education can enhance instructional methodologies and strategies , requiring educators to build upon their role in a teaching-learning dialogue. This also contributes to adding new contexts to the dynamics of the classes, enriching the activities and inviting students to explore, take risks and actively engage in the search for primary information, which refers to the themes at work..

The context in which the Design discipline operates today is holistic, being an area of investigation that dialogues with other areas that are dedicated to the construction of messages, realities and artifacts. Its main objective is to develop idiographic knowledge, in a pedagogical and professional reality that is dynamic, multiple and comprehensive, highlighting the interpretation of these assets as fundamental ingredients for the creation of a well-founded visual discourse.

A learning ladder is established between understanding, meaning and action, which is added here to the students' training process, by active processes and pedagogical construction, which are not previously observable or susceptible to experimentation – they are built in the context of the Anti-Amnesia project itself research and contribute to the modeling of a design pedagogy [3]. In this way, the pedagogical process is motivated and open to the exterior, maintaining and stimulating in the students the habit of questioning about what surrounds them; it provides an accurate view of the role of design, higher education and learning, which is built at the service of knowledge and understanding of the world and real problems; provides greater motivation on the part of those who will learn.

The developed activities and the dynamics of practical work in class allowed students to consolidate knowledge and skills on research and experimentation processes related to graphic and visual communication, through motivating work assignments. It was also integrated, as proposed in the program, the identification of the historical and semantic capital of graphic design as fundamental ingredients for the creation of a reasoned visual discourse and autonomy in the development of projects.

The educators, as mediators between students and research projects , and also acting in the fundamental role of a researcher, are in a prominent position to reflect on learning, collecting and interpreting data and propose decisions regarding teaching, and constructing an applicable pedagogical model. It is important that classrooms are also living laboratories for research and are also able to transform and be transformed. The educational resources that are built have a lot to do with writing and reflecting on the pedagogical activities themselves, in the form of scientific contributions to the higher education community involved in design. In this way, the participatory pedagogical approach is projected in the following pedagogical guidelines:

- it is revealing, as it proposes a proven transformation in specific and contextual narratives, which reinforce the established patrimonial relationship. It rehearses a holistic vision that treats design as a method of narrative content, opens space for dialogue and awareness of its own heritage.
- it is substantive, as it expresses a specific substance of the place, places and all the citizens who are actively involved. Design and its actions will always be a meeting point.



- it is participatory, as it believes that the viability of this pedagogy will pass through this media interpretation, finding in craft's heritage a ubiquitous and practical resource, which contributes to the emergence and support of this dynamic.

In this way, Anti-Amnesia's research is being reformulated itself, taking into account new questions and answers that emerge from the pedagogical practice. This evolution invites the implementation of changes in the teaching context itself, acting accordingly to the perception of the contexts, the interpretation of the dynamics and experiences of the students, and acting accordingly to this same analysis. Active pedagogy wants to contribute to these challenges of innovation and change and Design, in this form, moves from specialists to a universe of participation, and creates an opportunity for inclusion of subjects traditionally disconnected from themselves.

References

- [1] Brandão Pereira, J.; Alvelos, H.; & Chatterjee, A. (2019). Bridging Design Education and a Portuguese Handicraft Tradition – Pedagogical Experimentation through Design for Doing. In Conference Proceedings 9th International Conference The Future of Education, pp.23-27, Filodiritto Publisher, ISBN 978-88-85813-45-8
- [2] Elliott, C. (2020). "In Porto, A Push To Save Portugal's Historic Azulejo Tiles", Forbes Magazine on-line, February 14, 2020. Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherelliott/2020/02/14/in-porto-a-push-to-save-portugals-historic-azulejo-tiles/#501795322cf3>
- [3] McKernan, J. (2008). Curriculum and Imagination. London: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203946930>