

Exploring Synergies between the Classroom and Cultural Spaces: A Creative Approach to Art and Design Education

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Abstract

This creative experience was developed within an academic context, integrated into the "Graphic Design Project" curricular unit (Graphic Design Degree), where students are expected to develop design projects in the fields of corporate and institutional visual identity, with a strong emphasis on practical application and real-world relevance. By the end of the semester, students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of communication within contemporary cultural and technological paradigms, as well as an awareness of the historical foundations and evolution of the design discipline. The objective of this exercise was to provide students with the opportunity to engage in a real-world design project, focusing on the development of a visual identity. This was made possible through a collaboration between the academic institution and various cultural entities within the city of Barcelos, leveraging the students' proximity to these spaces, the communities they serve, and the unique challenges they present. The project spanned an entire semester and was structured into three main phases. The first phase involved research and the preparation of a project brief, including site visits and interviews with representatives of the participating cultural institutions. The second phase focused on the conceptual development and design of the brand and its associated visual identity elements, progressing from initial sketches to finalized graphic solutions. The third and final phase entailed the creation of a comprehensive Standards Manual to guide the consistent application of the visual identity across various formats and platforms. At the conclusion of the semester, the outcomes demonstrated that direct engagement with real-world stakeholders significantly enhanced students' research, comprehension, and critical analysis skills. Moreover, this experience fostered the development of problem-solving abilities and effectively challenged students to think creatively and innovatively within realistic design constraints.

Keywords: Design Teaching; Visual Identity; Creativity; Culture Community.

1. Introduction

The project was developed within an academic framework as part of the *Graphic Design Project* course, undertaken during the second year of the undergraduate degree in Graphic Design at the School of Design, Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave (IPCA), in Barcelos, Portugal. This course required students to conceptualize and execute visual and graphic identity proposals for cultural institutions located in the city of Barcelos. The institutional proximity between these cultural entities, the Municipal Government, and the School of Design facilitated a pedagogical environment grounded in practical application, allowing students to engage with design challenges that closely mirrored professional practice. Furthermore, this collaborative dynamic reinforced the reciprocal relationship between the academic institution and the broader community, fostering a model of experiential learning that supports both educational and cultural development within the region.

2. Theoretical and Practical Framework

This project aims to apply the formal and theoretical foundations of identity design, exploring its visual language as a strategic communication tool. Grounded in design theory, the work seeks to integrate both historical understanding and emerging paradigms, recognizing the evolution of the discipline and its role in shaping cultural and institutional narratives.

2.1. Fundamentals of Identity Design

Grounded in the discipline of identity design, the project draws on semiotic, cultural, and spatial theories to decode and rearticulate the visual language of a local institution. It explores how graphic design—through signs, symbols, and systems—can mediate the relationship between institutions and the spaces they inhabit, both physical and communicative.

At the beginning of the semester, prior receiving the specific briefing for the project, students were introduced to key reference authors in the field of semiotics, visual identity and communication design, such as *Paul Rand*, *Joan Costa* and *Charles Sanders Peirce*.

<i>Paul Rand</i> (1914-1996)	Modernist Graphic Designer. A reference for students, defended the importance of simplicity, functionality, and conceptual clarity in the creation of enduring visual identities. Identity as a communicative system grounded in meaning and consistency.
<i>Joan Costa</i> (1926-2022)	Communicologist, sociologist, designer and researcher. A holistic and systemic view of identity and visual communication. Highlighting the interplay between signs, perception and organizational culture. Helped students to understand identity design as a strategic and semiotic act.
<i>Sanders Peirce</i> (1839-1914)	Mathematician, scientist and philosopher. Peirce's Sign Theory/Semiotic (signification, representation, reference and meaning).

Table 1. Reference authors and theories.

This theoretical foundation served to contextualize the role of graphic design as a strategic discipline, capable of articulating visual language with institutional values and communication goals.

2.2. Barcelos Identity: Spaces and Signs

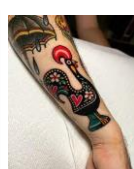
By addressing real institutional needs and proposing an intervention grounded in research and co-creation, the project positions design as a strategic and interpretive practice. It reflects on how historical heritage and local identity can be translated into modern, coherent, and adaptable visual systems, capable of reinforcing institutional narratives in both analogue and digital environments.

"The municipality of Barcelos has built an undeniable heritage, historical and social value around its traditional crafts and folk art. It can be said that traditional arts and crafts are at the heart of the people of Barcelos and that creativity is the legacy that the noblest artists of this land have cultivated over the centuries and that they are currently one of the great cultural references of this municipality." [1]

The most widely recognized identity symbol of the municipality of Barcelos is the *Galo de Barcelos* (Rooster of Barcelos), an element deeply rooted in the region's cultural heritage—particularly in its traditional craftsmanship, specifically in *Figurado barcelense* (Barcelos figurative pottery)—as well as in the city's iconography and historical narrative. The *Rooster*, a central figure in a well-known folk legend, has transcended its origins as a handcrafted object to become an emblematic symbol of Barcelos' cultural identity.



Figs. 1, 2, 3 (from left to right). The Barcelos rooster appears in various contexts, representing the city's identity in urban spaces, on pottery and as a graphic symbol of the city's creativity.



Figs. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 (from left to right). The Barcelos rooster appears in graphic identity of various commercial and institutional fields – “Águas de Barcelos” (water company of Barcelos); “Moto Galos Barcelos” (Barcelos moto club); Tattoo; Emblem of Barcelos; “Gil Vicente Futebol Clube” (Barcelos Football Club); “Barcelos Home Food” Restaurant.

Its presence is widely disseminated throughout the municipality, serving as a representative graphic symbol in various contexts: institutional materials, promotional content, local products, municipal infrastructure, signage, and cultural events. This institutional and symbolic appropriation of the *Galo de Barcelos* reinforces the region's cohesive identity and contributes to the city's national and international recognition as a reference in Portuguese folk art and tradition.

In this regard, the *Galo de Barcelos* is not merely a graphic symbol, but a cultural and communicative device that carries historical, social, and affective meanings.

3. Project Goals



The project seeks to respond to the real-world needs of a local cultural institution by identifying issues related to its current image and communication strategies. Through a process of research, analysis, and co-creation, students are expected to define an identity intervention program that addresses these needs. This includes the development of a comprehensive, effective, and coherent visual identity system, with the potential for future implementation and application in institutional contexts.

A key objective is to critically engage with the dynamics of communication within the context of contemporary culture and the current technological paradigm. This involves not only awareness of digital platforms and media convergence, but also sensitivity to the symbolic and experiential dimensions of identity in a hyper-connected society.



3.1. Involved institutions

For the purposes of this project, six local cultural institutions located in the city of Barcelos were selected: *Barcelos Turismo* (Barcelos Tourism), *Biblioteca Municipal de Barcelos* (Barcelos Municipal Library), *Galeria Municipal de Arte – GAL* (Municipal Art Gallery – GAL), *Theatro Gil Vicente* (Gil Vicente Theatre), *Museu de Olaria* (Pottery Museum) and *Torre Medieval* (Medieval Tower). All these institutions are publicly managed, either by the municipality or the Portuguese state, and operate on a non-profit basis. Their inclusion in the project reflects a broader commitment to promoting public access to culture, safeguarding regional heritage, and encouraging civic engagement through design.



Barcelos Turismo (Barcelos Tourism)

		<p>Promote the local history and traditions; multifunctional space that integrates a variety of services within its structure (technical and general tourist information point, a support station for pilgrims, a help desk for tourism and heritage-related matters and a tourism and handicrafts shop offering traditional local products); The space hosts exhibitions, conferences, seminars, and cultural gatherings, and is involved in the organization of tourist routes throughout the municipality, as well as guided tours of the historic center. It also serves as a reception area for organized tourism groups and as a support hub for the tourism trade sector.</p>
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Biblioteca Municipal de Barcelos (Barcelos Municipal Library)

		<p>Preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of Barcelos and the access to education and culture for all citizens; Promote a love of literature across all age groups, while encouraging critical thinking and reflection; Offers a variety of spaces dedicated to different activities, including: reading rooms within the library (one for children and one for adults), BMB Makerspace, Auditorium, Exhibition Room, and Technical and Administrative Services.</p>
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Galeria Municipal de Arte – GAL (Municipal Art Gallery – GAL)

		<p>Commitment to diversity and inclusion, presenting a wide range of works by national, international, and local artists; At least once a year, a local artist or cultural association is provided the opportunity to showcase their work; Mission of supporting community engagement and promoting cultural accessibility; Promotes artistic practice through a dynamic programme that includes exhibitions, educational activities, workshops, and public openings, thereby fostering an inclusive and participatory cultural environment.</p>
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Theatro Gil Vicente (Gil Vicente Theatre)









		<p>As part of the Municipality of Barcelos, this entity reflects the municipality's guiding principles for the cultural sector. Accordingly, its projects depend on the human and financial resources available, while striving to fully meet the needs and expectations of the citizens of Barcelos, as well as those of other entities that engage with municipal services. Hosts as its resident artistic company the professional theatre group "A Capoeira". Theatre operates as a multidisciplinary arts venue, with spaces for musical, cinema, theater pieces, conferences, exhibitions and cinema.</p>
Museu de Olaria (Pottery Museum)		
		<p>Cultural institution dedicated to the preservation, study, and promotion of the region's ceramic traditions, particularly those of the Minho region; mission focuses on promoting the traditional craftsmanship associated with pottery and <i>Figurado de Barcelos</i>; permanent and temporary exhibitions, educational activities and research programs; key role in the cultural development of the region and the safeguarding of Portuguese intangible heritage.</p>
Torre Medieval (Medieval Tower)		
		<p>Is one of the city's most important and iconic monuments, playing a key role in the cultural landscape of Barcelos. It is dedicated to exhibitions and activities focused on both local and national handicrafts. Each floor of the building serves a specific purpose: the ground floor functions as the reception area and handicrafts centre of Barcelos. The next three floors are dedicated to exhibitions, while the fourth and final floor features a beautiful viewpoint offering a panoramic view of the historic city centre. Houses the cultural space and headquarters of the Interpretation Centre of the Rooster and the City of Barcelos. This centre is dedicated to narrating the history and legend of the famous Rooster of Barcelos, one of the most iconic and widely recognized symbols of Portugal.</p>

Table 2. Research and analysis of the institutions (All the images were taken from the Barcelos City Council website: <https://www.cm-barcelos.pt>)

4. Methodology

Each project was developed individually during twenty-five class sessions (three hours each). The work took place in a project-based (atelier) setting, combining periods of independent work with supervision and guidance from instructors. At the end of each phase, students presented their progress and participated in group discussions and critiques. As previously mentioned, the project unfolded across three main phases:

a – The first phase consisted of research and contextualization of the project theme: - Based on the presentations provided by the teacher, the student was required to conduct research and gather data on the selected institution, focusing on several key dimensions: the institution's history, corporate philosophy, organizational structure, position within the national cultural context, communication strategies, internal culture and public relations approach, as well as its target audience(s). This research phase was essential in establishing a comprehensive understanding of the institution's current identity and communicative ecosystem. By critically analysing these aspects, the student-designer was able to identify both strengths and areas in need of development, thereby laying the groundwork for an informed and contextually responsive design proposal. Furthermore, this diagnostic process contributes not only to the designer's strategic thinking, but also to the institution's self-awareness, helping to clarify the factors that will shape the future visual identity solution. Following the initial research and analysis of the selected institutions, students were required to investigate and examine other relevant reference examples in the field of visual identity design, particularly those associated with cultural institutions. Based on the insights gathered, each student was expected to define a clear and coherent conceptual direction for their project. To visually articulate the chosen concept and set the tone for the design, students developed a mood board, assembling visual references such as colours, typography, textures, imagery, and compositional styles.

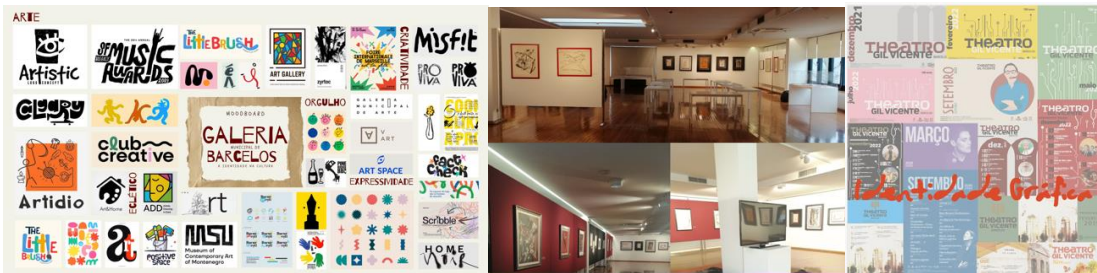


Fig. 10. Students research and analysis (from left to right): Student Mood Board (Municipal Gallery); Survey and collection of images and spaces (Municipal Gallery); Survey of communication and publicity materials (Gil Vicente Theater)

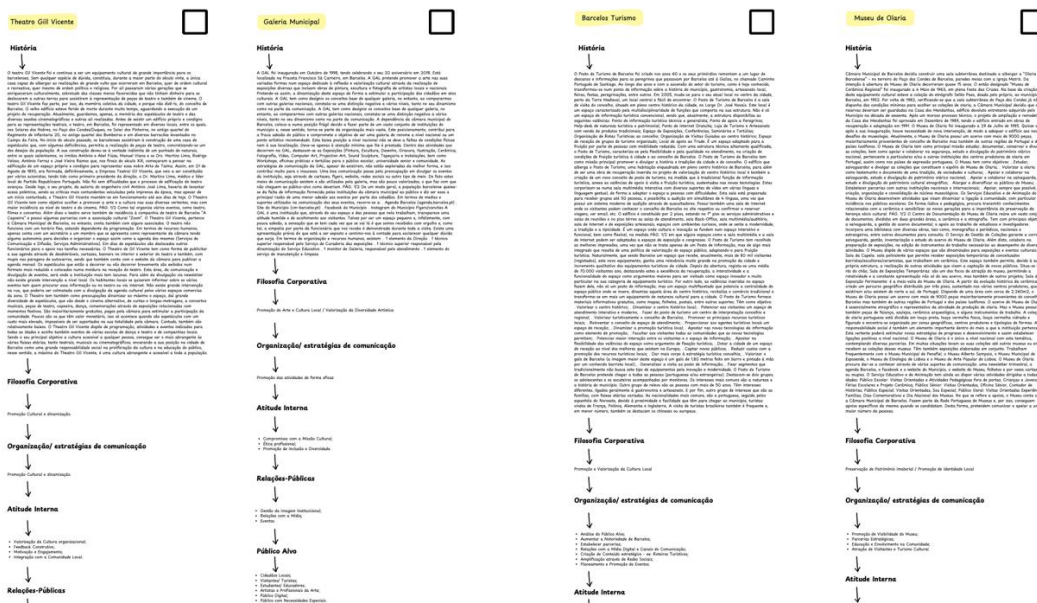


Fig. 11. Student Research and Analysis (the institution's history, corporate philosophy, organizational structure, position within the national cultural context, communication strategies, internal culture and public relations approach, as well as its target audience)

b – In the second phase of the project, students were required to design a set of visual signs and apply them consistently across a wide range of graphic media. This stage followed the conceptual and formal groundwork established in the initial phase of the project. Initially, and based on comprehensive research—encompassing historical, institutional, and visual analysis—a clear conceptual direction was defined to guide all formal and strategic decisions throughout the design process. The primary objective was to translate the institution's values, mission, and personality into a visual language that was clear, distinctive, and coherent. This involved the development of key identity elements, including the symbol and logotype, typographic and colour choices, and the design and articulation between the symbol and logotype. The visual identity was constructed following principles of geometric structure, visual rhythm, and formal harmony. The relationship between the symbol and the logotype was explored through various configurations—horizontal, vertical, isolated, and integrated—to create a system with strong structural flexibility. This adaptability is essential to ensure consistent and effective implementation across multiple formats and platforms.



Fig. 12. Student design process (sketches, digital drawings and final version), Pottery Museum.

Subsequently, students moved into the development of applications, beginning with the design of basic stationery materials in both print and digital formats. These included business cards, letterheads, continuation sheets, envelopes, message cards, and email signatures.

In addition to these core elements, students were also encouraged to design other context-relevant applications, tailored to the institution's communication strategy and needs (posters, brochures, signage systems, social media templates, branded merchandise, and environmental graphics).



Fig. 13. Student design process (proposals for applications), Pottery Museum.

c – The objective of the third phase was to establish all the rules for applying the developed corporate/institutional design system. These guidelines were formalised in a Graphic Standards Manual (also known as a Brand Guidelines Manual). This manual should cover the core elements of the identity system and provide rules for the layout of all printed materials, stationery, publications, signage and audiovisual elements. It should also provide guidelines for applications on other surfaces, such as three-dimensional objects and architecture, as well as for environmental design and internal and external communication practices.



Fig. 14. Details of the Graphic Standards Manual for Pottery Museum (student work).

5. Results and Final Considerations

At the end of the semester—after more than ninety hours of research work, site visits, interviews with institutional leaders and staff, exploratory walks through the spaces, and photographic documentation—students were challenged to reflect deeply and critically, and to develop new proposals for the visual identity of these institutions.

Could there be symbolic elements, beyond the Rooster of Barcelos, capable of representing each of these entities visually? Is it possible to conceive a coordinated image that preserves the individuality and autonomy of each institution—institutions that play a significant role in the cultural and educational fabric of Barcelos? Could new communication and outreach strategies be developed and implemented, fostering greater involvement of staff and leadership? How can design contribute to a deeper integration of the community in these spaces and their activities? And finally, is it possible to enhance the visibility of these institutions, which are housed in architectural settings of great historical and cultural value?



Fig. 15. Proposal for the Municipal Library visual identity (student work).



Fig. 16. Proposal for the Medieval Tower visual identity (student work).

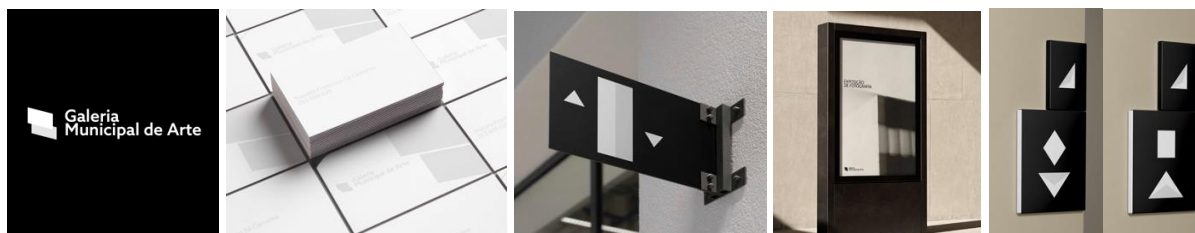


Fig. 17. Proposal for the Municipal Art Gallery - GAL (student work).

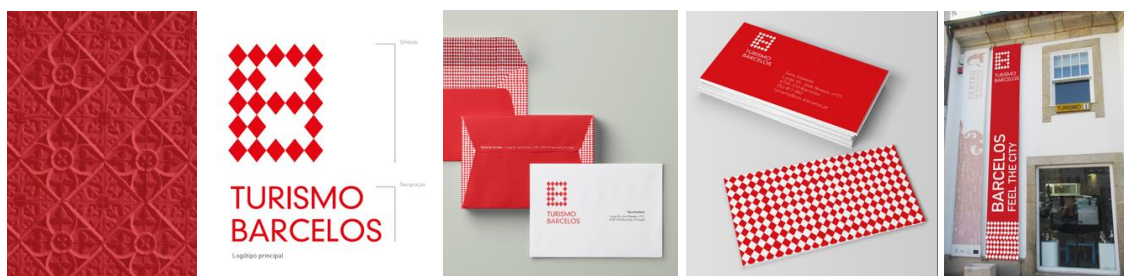


Fig. 18. Proposal for the Barcelos Tourism (student work).



Fig. 19. Proposal for the Gil Vicente Theatre (student work).



Fig. 20. Proposal for the Pottery Museum (student work).

Most of the proposals demonstrated a rich symbolic dimension—figurative, abstract, and typographic—based on the architecture of the spaces, the experiences and services they offer, decorative elements and details, and on characters, cultural heritage, and artisanal traditions (such as the *Figurado de Barcelos*). The colours drawn from the spaces, crafts, gardens, and heraldic heritage were applied with care, and the materials selected for various applications were studied and chosen to reinforce the diverse and multicultural identities of the institutions.

By the end of the project, it became clear how much students had developed a specific technical vocabulary and skills in the management and execution of corporate identity projects. This growth was made possible through continuous research, critical analysis, and public discussion of projects with the instructor.

The collaboration between the municipality and its institutions with the academic community, particularly within the field of design education, strengthens the designer's role in pursuing greater inclusion, community engagement, and innovation—as well as contributing to cultural development.

Notes:

[1] Unofficial English Translation from “O concelho de Barcelos construiu em torno da tradição artesanal e da arte popular um incontestável valor patrimonial, histórico e social. Pode-se afirmar que as artes e ofícios tradicionais são o âmago do povo barcelense e a criatividade o legado que os mais nobres artistas desta terra cultivaram ao longo dos séculos e constituem, presentemente, um dos grandes referenciais culturais deste concelho.” In: <https://cidadecriativa.barcelos.pt/#!barcelos-terra-de-forte-identidade-criativa/> - [online: 14/05/2025]

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IMAGE CREDITS

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- [Fig. 2.] The Barcelos rooster in pottery workshop. Photo: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro (2023). In: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-024-02748-5/figures/1>
- [Fig. 3.] The Barcelos rooster as a graphic symbol of *Barcelos Creative City*. In: <https://www.cm-barcelos.pt/municipio/camara-municipal/logotipos-e-simbologia/>
- [Fig. 4.] “Águas de Barcelos” (*water company of Barcelos*) graphic identity. In: <https://aguasdebarcelos.pt>
- [Fig. 5.] “Moto Galos Barcelos” (*Barcelos moto club*) graphic identity. In: <https://www.motogalos.pt>
- [Fig. 6.] Rooster Tattoo by @kkaarriissaannee, Monarch Tattoo, NJ. In: https://www.reddit.com/r/traditionaltattoos/comments/z1iyld/portuguese_barcelos_rooster_by_kkaarriissaannee/
- [Fig. 7.] Emblem of Barcelos by Noel Bordados. In: <https://www.bordadosnoel.pt/product/emblema-galo-barcelos>
- [Fig. 8.] “Gil Vicente Futebol Clube” (*Barcelos Football Club*) graphic identity (2005-2021). In: <https://ominho.pt/gil-vicente-discute-possivel-alteracao-do-emblema-em-assembleia-geral/>
- [Fig. 9.] “Barcelos Home Food” Restaurant graphic identity. In: <https://images.app.goo.gl/6gkqJD2YFLsKn4Dn8>
- [Fig. 10.] Students work. © IPCA
- [Fig. 11.] Students work. © IPCA
- [Fig. 12.] Student design process. © IPCA
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- [Fig. 20.] Proposal for the Pottery Museum (student work). © IPCA

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