

Media for Mediation: the role of multidisciplinary design pedagogy in the inscription of a dissipating millenary weaving culture

Abhishek Chatterjee University of Porto, Heitor Alvelos University of Porto, Jorge Brandão Pereira Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, Portugal

Keywords: Design and Media Education; Industrial Ethnography; Heritage Crafts; Active Pedagogy.

Abstract

This paper acknowledges the multidisciplinary role of media and design-based pedagogy within the context of Anti-Amnesia, a design research project that seeks to sustain disappearing traditional industries and practices in Northern and Central Portugal.

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.

Thereby, a wealth of traditional knowledge that is embedded in the material culture and human narratives of Almalaguês is at risk of permanent loss. Correspondingly, Project Anti-Amnesia intervenes by focusing on the recovery and restoration of related identities, traditions, and systems of knowledge: a mediation strategy that is based on the synthesis of several complementary media-centric courses of action.

The agency of the term “media” is thus taken into different frames of reference, including:

- As a generative resource for mediation and re-contextualization, by collecting and compiling ethnographic data and archival source material;
- As a premise for disseminating the legacy and continued validity of traditional industrial practices to international audiences;
- As a pedagogical tool that extends beyond digital mediation, acknowledging and encouraging alternative expressions of knowledge transfer — such as craft ecosystems —

fostering betterment of creative approaches in academic environments.

- The research is co-financed by Portugal 2020, alongside the European Regional Development Fund and the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal.

Introduction: Almalaguês - Millenary weaving in times of planned obsolescence

Despite being in practice since the 11th Century (Gomes, 2018), the textile craft of Almalaguês has remained fairly obscure beyond its traditional bastions - the village of Almalaguês – its namesake and likely provenience – and neighbouring Anagueis, both situated on the outskirts of the town of Coimbra in Central Portugal.

Gomes's research (2016, 2018) on the origins of this ancient handweaving practice indicates that the surrounding environs have historically held influence over its entity, affording suitable conditions for a weaving culture to emerge and prosper. The region's fertile river valleys and adjoining plains once sustained the production of linen and wool, and the proximity to long-established networks of trade routes, both riverine and overland, brought new materials and cultural impresses, particularly to Coimbra, the region's commercial centre.

However, Almalaguês has had a curiously curtailed cultural scrutiny throughout history, a status quo that is neither indicative of the quality of workmanship, nor of the level of localized proliferation. Gomes (2018) attributes such impassivity to the chaste aesthetics of the yarn whose raw tinge and texture may be viewed in spontaneity as withdrawing emphasis from the finer details of the weave, and instead, highlighting the fabric's functional aspects. As a result, the craft has been conventionally considered as rural and quotidian, and subsequently, not deserving of a place in erstwhile manor houses (de Almeida et al., 2017), which typically provided the space and cultural traction to other, more florid forms of tapestry. Correspondingly, facets of the craft including its deeply folkloric nature, and a quintessential home industry identity may have also contributed to a locally circumscribed footprint, however, such circumstances likewise may have conferred the craft with its distinctive features and characteristics.

The genuineness of Almalaguês's antiquity appears tangibly through the provenance of its motifs and the machinations of its rustic looms. The typical Almalaguês handloom is configured to ensure robustness, one of the key selling features of its produce. The manner in which it organizes the weave structure is simplistic and compact but allows the weavers enough manoeuvrability to deliver their characteristic adornments. The nuanced warp and weft manipulations create a stratiform with geometric, jacquard-like raised motifs over a

regular two-ply base. To perceptive observers of the design of textile, Almalaguês's proprietary technique represents an edifying return to times of *simplex munditiis*.



Figure 1. The Almalaguês looms have remained unchanged over centuries, incorporating a minimum number of metal parts in a largely wooden construction.

As objects, the end-products, typically mats, rugs and bedcovers, embody an idea of endurance, which is central to the craft's being. The products are made to endure generations of use, an aspect of the craft that mirrors another intergenerational hand over – that of Almalaguês's customs and traditions between the women of a household. Although geographically limited, such microcosmic prevalence of the craft and its inseparable relationship with the surrounding society and environment showcases the transition of Almalaguês from a vocation to an institution within a unique cultural practice.



Figure 2. The Almalaguês fabric is notable for its 'pulled' weave aesthetics. The sneakers represent a recent design research intervention focusing on product innovation (de Almeida et al., 2017).

In present times, however, the millenary craft form is facing an unprecedented situation of uncertainty. In recent decades, Almalaguês has borne the brunt of modernisation with the influx of cheaper foreign-made mass-produced goods that have decimated its traditional markets. As a result, the long-term economic viability of the practice has been called into question by younger generations of the weaving community, who were expected to carry its legacy forward, but have been forced to concede, and pursue alternative sources of subsistence. Thus, as it comes to light, the sustenance of Almalaguês's historical, cultural, and technical wealth rests on the resolution of the remaining generation of active practitioners – in tandem with the efforts of researchers such as Gomes, who seek to recover and inscribe the unique systems of knowledge associated with this traditional practice.

Anti-Amnesia – Design research as a medium for contextual recovery

Project Anti-Amnesia's primary aim is to legitimise the empirical and practice-led knowledge that is embedded in disappearing Portuguese manufacturing traditions in design and media education and research. Its ten-member research team is constituted of art and design professors and investigators representing five higher education institutions from Portugal and the UK. The project is based at the Research Institute for Design, Media, and Culture (ID+) in the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Porto, and is financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) in Portugal.

Anti-Amnesia's mediation process responds to the ever-growing evidence of traditional small-scale practices, particularly in Northern and Central Portugal, facing critical challenges to their present and future viability as a direct or incidental consequence of evolving global commercial and industrial realities (Gomes, 2016; de Almeida and Chatterjee, 2016; Albino, 2017). In accordance, the project is investigating the pluralities of 'value' that yet endure in some of these manufacturing contexts, and which can provide potential grounds for their socio-economic and cultural reactivation.

The project, correspondingly, considers four case studies of traditional Portuguese industrial practices that provide an insight into the ongoing capitulation of traditional making. This diverse set includes traditional Portuguese shoemaking, tile-making (Azulejos), and letterpress typography, alongside Almalaguês handweaving, wherein, each case study represents a different degree of technological and/or cultural obsolescence. By engaging directly with these craft cultures and the associated practice communities, the projects finds the purview required to validate its actions and assumptions.

This issue of contemporaneity versus convention is timely and pressing, and among the most critical cultural concerns discussed in present-day European and international cultural research projects, design philosophies and practices (Clarke, 2011; Manzini, 2015; Callaert

et al., 2015; Morrison, 2017). The discourse respectively finds its own vivid examples in contemporary Portugal through instances such as Almalaguês, for whom perceptive mediations are imperative to continuity.

Anti-Amnesia is also apprised of the knowledge wealth that is embedded in the material culture and human narratives surrounding the respective traditional industrial contexts that may currently lie at the precipice of permanent loss, if not urgently acted upon. Its primary course of intervention has, thus, been to recover such narratives, for which it has articulated a mediation strategy that employs an array of tactical interventions, including ethnographic research, documentation and archiving, and dissemination. The recovered knowledge correspondingly forms the basis for informed and design-driven restorative actions such as product and communication design, and for orienting new media and business strategies. The project views this variegated approach as essential to synthesizing resolutions pertaining to knowledge conservation and production, wherein:

- the recontextualization of conventional knowledge using contemporary means/technology, hybridization, and non-conventional application, becomes a contributing factor in the conservation of traditional practices and practice communities;
- the introduction of “atypical” aspects of traditional making, including related technologies, processes, aesthetics, and human narratives, to newer generation makers who may not necessarily belong to practice communities, can help extrapolate specialized knowledge for utilisation in further contexts, thereby, diversifying streams of intergenerational knowledge transfer, and potentiating future creative enterprise.

The methodological framework for the conservation component of the research is underpinned by ethnographic methods from the social sciences (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2011) in articulation with more intuitive design methods (de Almeida, 2012). This phase considers both essential and original nuances of traditional making, in order to ensure a comprehensive scoping of potential ‘value’ connotations, that are not limited to economic implications, but also include individual, social, cultural, artistic, and semantic conclusions.

The project builds upon collaborative doctoral and postdoctoral design research previously developed with traditional industries in the respective regions (de Almeida and Chatterjee, 2016), and accordingly incorporates the relevant experience, methods, and outputs that were previously attained.



Figure 3. The project has obtained historical and cultural insights surrounding Almalaguês weaving through collecting artisans' individual and collective testimonies, including a collection of work songs.

Active pedagogy as a source of restorative action

A key aspect of Anti-Amnesia's intervention process is its deep integration with art and design pedagogy, specifically involving higher education in fine arts, and product, graphic, and multimedia design. The project argues that active pedagogy is the primary vehicle for a functional perpetuation of the legacies in question, and a sustained dialogue between craft and education is imperative for mutual amelioration. Anti-Amnesia's approach is based on three broad intervention categories, to which the incorporated pedagogical activities contribute:

3. **Recovery:** Activities include the audio-visual documentation of 'evidence' of traditional knowledge derived from traditional industrial contexts that include recording personal testimonies materials, processes, and protagonists. The project maintains a source material library that has been created to collate the gathered/generated information.
4. **Re-interpretation:** Workshops that explore different application scenarios for the recovered information/material knowledge/specimens. These have included sessions for conceptualizing new product categories that can be made with Almalaguês textiles with Masters students of Product and Industrial Design at the University of Porto.
5. **Dissemination:** Activities that help communicate the enduring value of traditional making and makers to the general public, such as supporting dissemination across channels like web and radio and creating strategic and contemporized marketing content for practice communities.

Anti-Amnesia identifies a symbiotic connection between restorative research and the curricular requirements of art and design education and sees potential for reciprocity. It thereby puts special emphasis on a constant reversion of the generated outcomes and learnings, and in this regard, the curricular integration of art and design students augments its “build-measure-learn” approach to making meaningful impacts, in terms of research, restoration, and creative production. Accordingly, students across three academic levels (BA, MA, and PhD) are engaged with a view to configure an internal order of knowledge transfer that supports and supplements various long- and short-term interventions within the scope of the project.



Figure 4. Students of design engage directly with craft practices and communities towards comprehending the differentiating factors.

The first tier of pedagogic engagement corresponds to undergraduate courses and involves short-term ‘tactical’ activities that address specific impediments associated with the research subjects, and/or inform subsequent project interventions. In the case of Almalagués, for example, a tactical workshop related to packaging design has been conducted with students of graphic design on the basis of indications regarding the inadequacy of the craft’s generic packaging material towards conveying its legacy. The conceptualisation of new packaging materials that provide more information and amplify the product’s aesthetic appeal, provides grounds for re-examining the notion of value, in particular, the perceived value associated with the products. The workshop is considered to be of a tactical nature because it features a relatively short development period (5 weeks), is uncomplicated to implement, and carries expeditive impact potential. The participants connect directly with the artisans in order to

gain a greater sense of the associated contexts, and to incorporate emic insights in the ideation process. Other tactical themes include photographic surveys, developing new material implementation strategies, and digitization of specific product/pattern samples.



Figure 5. A packaging design concept for Almalagués table runners

Correspondingly, as part of the second tier, Masters students are integrated into the project during their end-term dissertation period (6-8 months) and assigned specific tasks. Output and learnings derived by the other tiers inform the research process at various stages of development. An example in this regard pertains to the construction of an interactive online project platform by students of digital design, that incorporates both research and tactical outputs generated. The platform is being developed with a view to bring together traditional practitioners, students, and individuals interested in traditional making towards fostering opportunities for knowledge and expertise transfer and capacitating collaborative exploration of new research and application avenues, during and beyond the project period.

The induction of early-stage PhD students in the final tier complies with the period (12-18 months) that may be required to establish a groundwork for individual research and dissemination. The students are invited to observe and support activities connected with both recovery and implementation aspects of the research, which includes ethnography, data classification and archiving, technical and interpretative analysis, and dissemination.

This integrated approach operates on the inference that by leveraging technological advantages that are presently afforded by contemporary media, pedagogical actions can become a mediating interface between the old and the new, and ensure an effective and dignified

recovery/reinstatement of facets pertaining to traditional making. Thus, the concept of media is projected as:

- means to rescue materials, documents, testimonies, and historical facts that may otherwise be lost or forgotten;
- a global platform for acknowledging the processes and protagonists of traditional industrial practices as heritage in themselves;
- a medium to communicate the allegorical and historical values that are intrinsic to these contexts, towards arguing for their distinctive uniqueness in present times;
- conditions for the prototyping of exploratory design work based on the hybridization of materials and aesthetics from the several study contexts, towards obtaining new product and market prospects;
- a connecting thread between the protagonists of traditional industries, and universities, administrative bodies and start-up culture, within a collaborative environment geared towards mutual support and innovation.

In this way, the project subscribes to Droumeva and Murphy's (2016) approach of mobilising media production as "scaffolding and enabling students to explore critical issues in culture and society in ways that supplement and transcend traditional instruction and assessment, opening possibilities to make a direct impact on the social issues they are exploring", and that such real-world experiences "create greater motivation and spur more imaginative creations", and the corresponding productions "take on meaning as legitimate material artefacts in the wider (mediated) world."



Figure 6. Students utilize a series of new media tools to supplement their creative process.

In conjunction, Droumeva and Murphy reflect on a paradigm shift in education currently evolving, wherein:

How knowledge is acquired, disseminated, and interpreted through digital communication technologies has reached a point where we need to respond as educators in ways that are relevant and useful to students throughout their lives.

Anti-Amnesia's pedagogic actions comply with and support this analysis, particularly in the way they functionally mirror their essentiality - facilitating the transposition of knowledge from an older paradigm to a newer one.

Conclusion

In conclusion, project Anti-Amnesia comprehends that while it may not be its position to counter the organic evolution of manufacturing standards, it can still make meaningful contributions by focusing on sustaining the specialized traditional knowledge that is inherent in surviving cultures such as Almalaguês handweaving. In sequence, it articulates a creative interrelationship between design, media, and heritage crafts, towards exploring resolutions to the occurring conflicts between convention and contemporaneity.

Through its association with the Almalaguês weaving community, Anti-Amnesia recognizes how restorative endeavours, action-based pedagogy, and broader dissemination can contribute to the continuation of specialized knowledge in a cultural context until conducive tools and conditions are systematically developed for further socio-economic reinstatement. Critically, it provides grounds for future makers to connect with their regional cultural heritage through media production interventions and uses both new and old expressions of media to raise greater public and academic consciousness about the industrial past and the associated practice communities.

The research is being developed within the framework of the project "Anti-Amnesia: design research as an agent for narrative and material regeneration and reinvention of vanishing Portuguese manufacturing cultures and techniques", 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).

References

- Albino, C., 2017. *À procura de práticas sábias – Design e Artesanato na significação dos territórios*. CEARTE and University of Aveiro.
- Callaert, J., Landoni, P., Van Looy, B. & Verganti, R., 2015. Scientific yield from collaboration with industry: The relevance of researchers' strategic approaches. *Research Policy*, 44(4), 990-998.

- Clarke, A., 2011. *Design anthropology. Object culture in the 21st Century*. (Edition Angewandte). Vienna: SpringerVerlag.
- de Almeida, P. C., 2012. *Brand archives: the rescuing of locally specific brand imagery as a graphic design response to the globalization of visual identity*. PhD thesis, Exhibition catalogue (Scholarly Edition). London: Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London.
- de Almeida, P. C., & Chatterjee, A., 2016. *Sapatilhas: cultural significance and industrial legacy*. Poster at Ciência 2016. Lisbon: Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education.
- de Almeida, P. C., Chatterjee, A., & Gomes, A.J., 2017. *Cortebel 50 in Almalaguês*. In Proceedings of Intersections: Collaborations in Textile Design Research Conference, 13 September 2017, Loughborough University London, U.K.
- Droumeva, M., & Murphy, D., 2016. *A Sound Pedagogy: Active Learning through Media Production*. EDULEARN16 Proceedings, 3974-3982.
- Gomes, A. J., 2016. *Design, Tradition and Craft: The Case of Almalaguês*. Presentation at PhD Design Forum, UPTEC/PINC, 15 April 2016. PhD Design International Doctoral Program, University of Porto, Portugal.
- Gomes, A. J., 2018. *Almalaguez – Tecer o futuro com os fios do passado*. PhD Thesis in Design, University of Porto.
- Manzini, E., 2015. *Design, when everybody designs: An introduction to design for social innovation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Morrison, J., 2017. *The hard life*. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers.
- Pink, S., 2007. *Doing visual ethnography*. London: SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Rose, G. 2011. *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. 3rd edition. London: Sage.