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From Cork Labour Activities to Co-design Production. Azaruja Case Study

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Abstract: The paper is centered on a social innovation design project which is being developed in the village of Azaruja, in the southeast of Portugal. The objective is to build a co-creative action with the local people, anchored on a local natural resource - cork - which is peeled from the cork oaks that characterize the place landscape. This project is focused on the labour activities related with cork that define the people and the place, which is understood in the present investigation in all its complexity, combining human, biophysical, geographical, economic, political, social, cultural, historical and ecological dimensions. The paper begins with Hannah Arendt's *vita activa* concept, which is crucial in distinguishing between the notions of *labour*, *work* and *action*. This is followed by some considerations about design anthropology in order to understand the methodology used in the co-creation process. Finally, the case study is described and examined its co-design methods.

Keywords: Cork, Labour, Co-creation, Co-design, Social Innovation

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses a social innovation design project which is being developed in the village of Azaruja, in the south-eastern region of Portugal called Alentejo. The objective is to set up a co-creative action with the resident population, based on the region's preeminent raw material - cork - which is peeled from the cork oaks that characterize the local landscape. Equally important, and deriving from this natural resource, are all the resultant labour activities that have defined, generation after generation, the people and the place, which the present research seeks to encompass in all its complexity, combining, as it does, human, biophysical, geographical, economic, political, social, cultural, historical and ecological aspects.

Regarding the theory that supports the study, the paper begins with Hannah Arendt's *vita activa* concept, which is fundamental to distinguishing between the notions of *labour*, *work* and *action*. This

is followed by a few considerations in the field of design anthropology, which are important to inform the methodology used in the co-creation process. Finally, the last section is dedicated to the method of co-design, from the perspective of social innovation, which is the main core and the territory of this theoretical and practical research. At the same time, the case study and its different specificities are described from complementary viewpoints.

2. *Labour, work and action as social innovation forces*

One of the most relevant works from the German philosopher Hannah Arendt, entitled *The Human Condition*, distinguishes between three activities that characterize the human being, which incorporate the *vita activa* concept, namely: *labour*, which is related to the human metabolism and serves as sustenance to life; *work*, concerning the artificialism that characterizes society, as well as the fabrication of something new; and *action*, whose reason of being is related to politics and public life, without the need for artificialism (Arendt, 2001, pp. 20-21).

The *vita activa* theory develops a deep understanding of work as a cornerstone for the human being's balanced formation, as well as for the harmonious evolution of the social body. This is a thought that informs the present investigation, which has as its starting point the concept of labour, in the sense that this is a fundamental element to value the place and the people who inhabit it. Labour and the resulting product, as well as its equation with society, and each citizen, are determining factors for the evolution of the human being's sustainability, the repercussions of which are felt in several domains, such as the social, economic and cultural sphere.

Ancient Greek culture did not consider the distinction between *labour* and *work* important, defending the existence of slaves as a way to differentiate these human beings who worked by necessity from the free men to whom they were subject. The social function of slavery was to separate *work* from the "autonomous and authentically human way of life". In the Classical Period, the difference between *labour* and *work* dwindled. Both belonged to the private sphere and to the domain of necessity, as distinct from the public and political territory of *action* (Arendt 2001, pp. 25, 110).

In the Modern Age, not only was there no undeniable differentiation between the *animal laborans*¹ and the *homo faber*², but there was also a change in the *vita activa*, which appointed *work* as the main quality. At the same time, during this period, the differentiation between productive and unproductive *work* emerged; later, the contrast between skilled and unskilled *work*; and finally, the separation of activities according to a type of manual or intellectual *work*. In this context, specifically regarding to *work* productivity and unproductivity, it is important to mention the work of Adam Smith and later Karl Marx, who not only valued *labour* as *work*, but also despised unproductive *work*, which, according to these authors, represented a "perversion of *work*, as if any activity that did not enrich the world were unworthy of this name" (Arendt, 2001, pp. 111-112).

The Modern Age was marked by the rapid development of production forms that led society to assume *labour* as *work* and to confuse the *animal laborans* with the *homo faber*, that is to say, bearing in mind the elimination of *work* and necessity, it was thought in the *animal laborans* as if it were the *homo faber*. Another characteristic of this period was the lack of differentiation between intellectual *work* and manual *work*. The most relevant at this point was the question of productivity, in which *work* was included. Marx, in particular, defended "labour power" as a producer of surplus,

1 The human being who is based on work as the condition of his existence.

2 The human being who is able to create or manufacture with intelligence and tools.

focusing on the *work's* usefulness, on the fact that it is an inescapable premise of human being's existence, as well as for acting as an intermediary between man and nature. In this context, products created by human life are considered the result of a combination of raw materials and *work*. From Arendt's perspective, the thought of Smith and Marx reveals a clear distinction between *labour* and *work*, as far as they defend both productive and unproductive *work* (Arendt, 2001, pp. 111-115).

In this framework, while in antiquity labour was disregarded, in modernity it is overvalued through its productivity. In this last period, the concept of *work* is deepened taking into account the greater or lesser effort of *work*, as well as it is valued by the potential surplus that is inherent in the human *work* force and not in the quality or character of the produced things; that is, the *work* quality does not lie in the nature, utility, context or longevity of what is produced, but in the quantitative evaluation of a number of factors related to production (Arendt, 2001, pp. 117-118).

The resulting product of *work* contributes to humanity's "permanence and durability". "It is within this world of durable things that we find the consumer goods with which life assures the means of its survival". It is an effort generated by the *work* of the human body whose purpose is to create "things that are not consumed but used, and to which we accustom ourselves inasmuch as we use them". The result is "the world's familiarity, its customs and habits of exchange between men and things, as well as between men and men. What consumer goods are for human life, the objects of use are for the world of man" (Arendt, 2001, pp. 118-119).

The systematic way in which *labour* is developed is similar to the biological process that characterizes the evolution of the human being and nature, which repeats itself at a given rhythm without a beginning or an end. In a different way, *work* is defined by the elaboration process of the implicit object, which ends when this latter is added to the universe of objects created by the human being. In this sense, *work* is the process where matter from nature is transformed according to human convenience, which is dependent on consumption which, in turn, is borne by *labour*. That is, consumption and *labour* are two relatively cyclical processes that arise from *work* activity (Arendt, 2001, pp. 121-123).

Arendt's criticism of the three main theorists in Modern Age, namely John Locke, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, is that these philosophers analyze *labour* and *work* together. The three authors refer to *labour* as the point that marks the beginning of productivity and the maximum expression of humanity. Marx, one of the main targets of Arendt's criticism, reiterated that *work* completion coincides with the final product, without considering his own theory about work as a process analogous to the relationship between the human being and nature (Arendt, 2001, p. 126).

Within the scope of the socially engaged artistic project of the present research, the joint evolution of the three factors that integrate the *vita activa* concept is determinant for local development. In this sense, a specific context is created with the aim of stimulating: (1) *labour*, according to local culture and the region's natural resources; (2) creative and socially innovative *work*, simultaneously based on local tradition and contemporary technological resources; (3) and civic *action*, which is evidenced not only by the development of the project itself, and the subsequent effects in the community, but also by the project's visual communication and the subjectivity which is expected to be generated in this process.

2. Azaruja case study: *Creative practices around the production of cork*

The socially engaged artistic practice takes place in a village of Alentejo in the south of Portugal. The place belongs to the Évora municipality and is popularly known as Azaruja, although São Bento do Mato is the official name. This Portuguese region is characterized by its plains where, among different kinds of flora and fauna, the cultivation of cork oaks predominates.

Cork labour activity in Portugal, and all the associated knowledge and experience dates back to the 18th century with the systematic cultivation of cork forests, which has been since then one of the main raw materials for the production of objects and for the development of the region, in social, economic and cultural terms.

The main problem in this kind of local production, which was the trigger for the beginning of this social innovation process, was upon the finding that the capacity of production has been decreasing through the years. Since the end of the 20th century, due to the effects of globalization and to weak political decisions the number of companies has been reduced from 24 to 5, resulting in the deterioration of social and economic conditions. With regard to local culture and the know-how of cork production, the knowledge of every process has been retained, including the harvesting, stripping, cutting and cooking, the production of traditional crafts, as well as recycling the production waste for new applications.



Figure 1. *Photography workshop with young locals in a cork factory, Azaruja, Portugal. Video frame (Gorgel Pinto, Reaes Pinto, 2015).*

The methodology used was based in participatory actions with the main objective of engaging a greater number of representatives from the local culture (Figure 1). In this context, the project sought to integrate people from different generations, from which it was expected that they undertake the role of empirical designers. The key point was to promote the deep knowledge about cork and all its aspects that the community already has, and from this knowledge to start the development of some kind of object. In other words, the objective was to constitute a workgroup

formed by design experts and non experts aiming the development of cork know-how and the advent of new creative solutions. Another particularity of the Azaruja socially engaged work is the symbolic meaning of the entire process and its result, as this is something that pertains to the domain of public life, citizenship and politics.

In this context, several participatory activities were organized with different generations in the community. Workshops in the fields of photography and assemblage were developed with young people, always in relation to cork and everything that surrounds it. Both with the young population as with adults and seniors, one of the major objectives of the participatory activities was to think about Azaruja's culture and particularly about the tradition of cork. With this objective, some collective sessions were also organized, in which older people told their labour and work stories to young people and received the surprising feedback that kids always give, which was very important for the reciprocal understanding of both and it is a powerful way of generating intergenerational equity and solidarity (Figure 2). It is important to note that the designers were also an active part of these participatory sessions, as they represent a view from outside that is a reflection of those inside the community, as well as the fact that they were the ones responsible for guiding the subjective and creative process whenever it was not able to work by itself.



Figure 2. Conversation around cork labour activities with retired workers, students and designers in a local elementary school, Azaruja, Portugal. Video frame (Gorgel Pinto, Reaes Pinto,, 2015).

Regarding the engagement with the adults who represent the working population, various visits were made to their work places, such as the fields where the cork is extracted, the factories where it is then cropped, cooked and other important stages of the transformation process (Figure 3). In parallel with the cork labour activities it also explored a local family cutlery factory which was founded when the cork industry was flourishing many years ago.

An important dimension of the Creative Practices around the Production of Cork work is its audiovisual communication. Thus, every participatory and co-creative initiative is being documented through video, photography and audio recordings. The reproduction of events will be part of an archive whose objective is to emphasize the community nature of cork labour, the co-creative work

developed in partnership with experts, as well as to represent a citizenship statement, whose particular objective is to claim for more attention and a different sensitivity concerning the place's holistic sustainability.

In the near future one last participatory activity will take place - the co-creation of one or more utilitarian cork objects through the use of contemporary industrial processes of transformation. For this purpose a workshop has been planned for which a number of materials have been designed aiming at the interaction with participants of all generations, in order that they can take certain options and find specific solutions for the proposed objectives (Figure 4). This last workshop will be developed in a local association during which the audiovisual archive and other materials produced since the beginning of the Azaruja project will be presented.



Figure 3. Participant observation with locals working on cork oaks peeling and stacking at Serra d'Ossa, Azaruja, Portugal. Video frame (Gorgel Pinto, Reaes Pinto, 2015).

Besides the local population, there are three authors involved in the Azaruja project, namely António Gorgel Pinto, Paula Reaes Pinto and Şölen Kipöz. The first two develop their practical and theoretical works around socially engaged art and design, while the latter is a design theorist and fashion designer. It is important to note that the project initiative came from the second author mentioned, who shared her interest and concepts with the other two, who, in their turn, integrated the work and contributed to its enrichment.

3. Participant observation as a method for co-creation

The artistic project is focused on co-design, “supported by an integrated perspective of place, understood in its complexity – combining human, biophysical, geographical, economic, political, social, cultural, historical and ecological aspects that largely characterize local life experiences” (Reaes Pinto, 2013, 229, 231).

The empathetic approach adopted as a methodology of interaction and co-design was driven by an aesthetic paradigm of dialogue with special emphasis on listening to the local people. This kind of

interaction with a special focus on dialogue and the need of joining those whom one wants to learn about is called participant observation, which is a social science methodology related to anthropology, used by many designers and artists. According to Nelson and Stolterman (2012, p. 18) “designers have to begin with immersion in real-life situations to gain insight into experiences and meanings that form the basis for reflection, imagination, and design”. The importance of listening is centred on the well being of people and on their relation with the environment, as far as it is a way to encourage the sharing of mutual knowledges (Levin, 1989, p. 223), which contributes to a beneficial innovation of relations among people (Bohm, 1989, p. 119), and promotes the equality of different cultures and knowledge (Fiumara, 19, p. 195).



Figure 4. Object decoration experimental work to develop with locals at the final workshop. Cork paper print (Gorgel Pinto, Reaes Pinto, 2015).

With a similar approach to design anthropologists, the team working in the Azaruja project has different roles: as co-creators, researchers and facilitators (Smith & Otto, 2013, p. 18). After elucidating local people about what we wanted to do, their inclusion in the project was proposed. The life stories they recount were a means of giving them a voice. The project has been developed on the intersubjective vulnerability, since it only happens with the collaboration of the Azaruja inhabitants.

As mentioned above, with the aim of getting knowledge of all the cork process, some participatory observations of cork extraction from trees were done, in the hills surrounding Azaruja, dialoguing with the workers about their labour tasks. This seasonal work must be done in summer, when temperatures are high and the cork can be peeled off more efficiently, without harming the tree. Encounters were also held with workers in Azaruja factories which deal with cork preparation. A number of visits to other workplaces, with some affinity with cork were made, such as to a small family cutlery factory with a great tradition in Alentejo. Conversations with local people, especially retired cork workers, had a special significance (Figure 5).

The relational character of this meetings also included the recording of life stories, which give visibility to the place social diversity, anchored in living experiences, rather than in abstract

structures (Bertaux, 1997, as cited in Casal, 1997, p. 94). All the project's relational process nourished the creative process. The biographical dimension of the project, based on collecting the Azaruja locals' life stories, was related, essentially, with our belief that this is the more direct methodology to communicate the realities, either distinct as collective, of these people (Reaes Pinto, 2013, pp. 352-353). The life experience of each one reveal the heterogeneity richness of the persons living in a place and of their cultures. Biography also bring to life the relations between "a personal story with a social macro-history" (Casal, 1997, pp. 87-88). The biographical aspect is always connected with the relational context, which in the project's case was centered on the richness resulting from the interaction, always changing, between people from Azaruja and the investigators. This interaction is like an "intermediate space" as it is marked both by proximity and distance (Durão, 1997, p. 176).



Figure 5. Retired worker showing his cork crafts during a conversation with designers. Miniature of a traditional object for carrying food. Video frame (Gorgel Pinto, Reaes Pinto, 2015).

The relation between the researchers and the Other begins with distance. Proximity is build through dialogue that gradually start to fade distance (and create a place of intimacy) between Azaruja inhabitants and researchers, sharing complicity (Casal, 1997, p. 94; Schneider & Wright, 2006, p. 16). In the project's scope, the generation of bonds and reciprocal learning between local collaborators and investigators were a real contribution resulting from interaction, as well as a channel to allow the engagement of local people in the posterior stage - the symbolic and utilitarian objects co-creation.

4. Co-design production

Design practice is developed with various methods, with diverse protagonists and in different social contexts. These aspects are interdependent and can produce multiple kinds of interaction and participation between user and designer.

In general, design is performed in two different ways - the “abstract” logic, in which experts from different disciplines implement their knowledge without the direct interaction with participants; and a “concrete” form of understanding that embraces empirical knowledge (Lee, 2006, p. 2).

It is worth noting the concept of co-design, which integrates several practices of contemporary design, such as social design, participatory design, meta-design, among other kinds of engaging users of the design project in participation. The stakeholders engagement in the problems and context perception process is crucial to get more efficient results. Co-design is a fundamental contribution to make design process more egalitarian, expanded and open to other domains and it is being accepted in trade and non-benefit areas (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p. 147).

Co-design is a design hybrid branch that mixes various artistic practices and spheres of knowledge to the betterment of society. It is centered on the development of ideas, objects and functions, impregnated with meaning, anchored on collaborative activities that allow the cooperation of users and non users, whether the benefits materialize or not.

The dialogical practice contributes to the increase of this kind of social innovation, as far as it cultivates the same importance of listening and speaking. In this sense, it is relevant that the expert designer works his dialogic capacity, with the aim of interacting and improve the co-design process. The dialogical method should be used to encourage the co-design project and keep it open (Manzini, 2015, pp. 53, 67).

In all the project process the methodologies of interaction design and fieldwork are used, requiring more or less long-term stays in Azaruja. The methodology of fieldwork is based on research-action, insofar as the researcher and the actor also assume the role of each other, and leads the action for investigation objectives. It should be noted that this methodology is focused on action and considers actors as participants and not as mere passive objects (Guerra, 2000, p. 53). Regarding the Azaruja project, this methodology is marked by the continual interactions between the investigators and the inhabitants of Azaruja, as well as their activities and the places where they live. The rebuilding of collective memory within the community was produced by this social knowledge. In this sense, the investigator can be individually transformed when he works on the terrain, as he is affected by the context (Augé, 2004, p. 79).

In fact, there was an enrichment of the investigator's knowledge resulting from the multiple approaches experience, performed in the community of Azaruja, through direct and participatory observation and by a gathering of information from the place, through audio, video, and photographic records. The entire process was carried out through diverse Azaruja visits, during which the authors were creating bonds of familiarity with the population. A significant consequence of this social design practice is its spreading to foment society's thinking on social issues.

Thus, the mapping of social phenomena, the creation of communication contents, sociological research by collecting life stories and the construction of real or fictional representations are means of giving visibility to co-design practices. In respect to mapping phenomena of a peculiar place or community, the objective is fundamentally to create an instrument of reflection for the evolution of the place itself.

The generation of media content from the actions developed is also relevant, as it guarantees the impact on the community engaged and on the broader society.

According to Manzini (2015, 122-132), the communication originated by content creation is also important since it feeds the creative process of collaboration. The collecting of life stories, as being part of the anthropological and sociological research, is a meaningful approach as far as it allows the

transference of relevant personal and collective experiences to the community. Another opportunity to disseminate co-design projects is the construction of real or invented representations, which emerge from the ideation of a social innovation image to be debated among all collaborators. This way of working is based on a survey of their motivations, which are embraced to create a meticulous plan with the indispensable actions to accomplish the conceived idea.

6. Conclusion

The present research belongs to the scope of design for social innovation, which can be characterized as a transdisciplinary territory, whose dynamics is stimulated by a certain social context and the development objectives determining the artistic project. With regard to the Azaruja intervention, it is a set of practices that work as a whole and share a hybrid methodology, which uses a variety of methods from different disciplinary areas, such as participatory observation, co-design and the communication through an audiovisual archive.

The "Creative practices around the production of cork" seek to value labour as a community structuring element, as well as by its interaction with local natural resources and the environment in general. In the case of this Alentejo region, cork is a raw material that defines people and place in different ways - socially, economically and culturally, that should be promoted in order to develop local sustainability.

This is a project with pragmatic objectives in order to value the region from a socially structuring local raw material, which results in a set of activities around the identified material that seek to stimulate local culture, with particular focus for the development of the inhabitants creativity. Simultaneously, the project assumes a symbolic aspect, which seeks to commend the Azaruja residents with a labour relationship with cork and, at the same time, to claim greater sensitivity in society to this type of place.

As mentioned, the co-design project is close to completion. There will be an exhibition/encounter with the project participants showing through images the whole process. For this encounter other Azaruja inhabitants will also be invited and everyone will participate in a new creative workshop in order to contribute for the production of utilitarian and symbolic object(s) for local culture.

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