

## Reinterpretation of tradition values, in Minho territory: Handcraft – a reading key

### Reinterpretar os valores da tradição do território do Minho: o artesanato como chave de leitura

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#### Abstract

To propose new experiences through design - as a communication interface between past and future - is to propose new products that are not only seen as experiences' mediators, but are especially capable of promoting quality of life, fostering more intense experiences of places, acting as emotional relationships with the space through the indexing of the body, and anxious to resolve concerns of a symbolic nature. Minhoto's craftsmanship positions itself as key for the interpretation of this vision; the material heritage that carries through its stories the immateriality, the relationship of civilization with the material world that naturally translates a collective value represented in memory and tradition. The closeness of these two variables - crafts and design - reflects a challenge to design's disciplinary skills, a role recognized as crucial in the alter-globalization - "a globalization based on people" (Gebre, *in* Santos, 2003) - through its ability, demonstrated over time, to link citizens with the places we deem vital to the local cultural identities. Design as a discipline with an inclination for transdisciplinarity and for managing complexity, through its many possible languages, incorporating metaphors as representations for the experience, has the ambition of giving visibility to the values of the territory, through knowledge, which is synthesis of representations (Deleuze, 1994), reverting or adding to its value, that is, making it present by reinterpreting the craftsmanship.

**Key words:** craftsmanship, design, experience, territory.

#### Resumo

Propor novas experiências pelo design – como interface de comunicação entre o passado e o futuro – passa por propor novos produtos, que não são só entendidos como mediadores das experiências, mas que são sobretudo capazes de fomentar a qualidade de vida, potenciando vivências mais intensas dos lugares, actuando como relações afectivas com o espaço através da indexação do corpo, e ambicionando resolver inquietações de natureza simbólica. O artesanato minhoto, coloca-se como um elemento que posiciona uma chave de leitura a esta visão; património material que transporta através das suas histórias a imaterialidade, a relação da civilização com o mundo material que naturalmente traduz um valor colectivo traduzido em memória e tradição. O aproximar destas duas variáveis – artesanato e design - traduz um desafio às competências disciplinares do próprio design; um papel considerado fundamental numa reconhecida alter-globalização – "uma globalização baseada nas pessoas" (Gebre, *in* Santos, 2003) – através da sua capacidade, demonstrada ao longo dos tempos, de relacionar os cidadãos com os lugares, que julgamos fundamental às identidades culturais locais. O design como disciplina com apetência transdisciplinar e de gestor da complexidade, através das suas linguagens, incorporando metáforas como representações para a experiência, terá a ambição de dar visibilidade aos valores do território, a partir do conhecimento, que é síntese de representações (Deleuze, 1994), devolvendo-lhe ou acrescentando-lhe valor, isto é, tornando-o presente, pela reinterpretação do artesanato.

**Palavras-chave:** artesanato, design, experiência, território.

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## Introduction

This work proposal results from an ongoing research (begun in 2009), integrated in the PhD program in Design of the University of Aveiro, and called: *The sense of Place. Valorization of territorial identity through design.*

It seems appropriate now to establish a dialogue, between the theoretical dimension already achieved through the ongoing research and the pursued territorial requalification policies, which are inherent to it, and that are also stated formally in the Guimarães application for European Capital of Culture, in 2012, aimed at the social, economical and urban regeneration of this territory.

This dialogue results from evident contact points, we can consider excellent, between the theoretical approach that has already started – The sense of Place (the thesis) – and a practical dimension that is susceptible to be tangible with the contact of the responsible agents who strategically lead the different actions related with territorial regeneration, specifically, that of Guimarães.

Identifying, amplifying and promoting a given territory's value system through Design, states the need for a new research frame, which proposes itself to interact according to a multidisciplinary platform, where complex and dynamic variables operate, altogether giving sense to the territory's own nature.

The designer, positioning himself as manager of the process, shall understand design as a meta-discipline; design as system, in a net (Luhmann, 1998), allowing for the recreation of a possible world considering the historical, cultural and economical characteristics of the territory under analysis. This process, which incorporates the planning of applicable and integrable strategies – the governance, the management of the public and private sectors, education and research institutions and, especially the local communities themselves - and project, applied to the given territorial context, with the ability to create models, or project typologies, is oriented to strategic goals, centered in the valorization of communities.

We will seek, in this way, to contribute for the development and identification of design-acting strategic actions aimed at the identitarian valorization of the territory, through the implementation of glocal (Virilio, 2000) culture-related products and services of an increased aggregated value, which become anthropological generators and amplifiers of the life of places.

The goal is to reveal the skill of design to identify the elements of local identity, to amplify/redesign them, and to make them visible to internal and external customers. This is strengthening a local resource through the reinvention of tradition by creating a unique set of products - artifacts, devices and services – metaphorically understood as a vehicle to transport a local culture to a global territory. In this way, products gain the ability to fuel the relationship with the territory and, naturally, to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants, rethinking the values of its symbolic dimension.

## Justification of the project proposal

The Minho, the geographical region where the city of Guimarães is located, is historically built by diffuse territorial structures. Through a Local rereading of this territory we

may notice that it bears resemblances with other contemporary, miscigenated and transgenic territories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This reality allows to test and project, at the local scale, a model of sustainable development for the territory, to be transported to a broader scale, such as that of Europe.

This European scale vision has been sedimenting itself, gaining tangibility through the thought of prestigious authors, among whom stands Steiner (2007), when he refers: "The European landscape was metaphorically, but also materially, molded, humanized, by feet and hand. As in no other part of the globe [...] the landscape took shape, not so much due to geologic time but to historic-human time. [...] The genius of Europe is that which William Blake would have called "the sanctity of small detail". It is the genius of linguistic, cultural and social diversity, a prodigal mosaic that so many times travels a trivial distance, separated by twenty kilometers, a division between worlds" (Steiner, 2007, p. 49).

Portugal, at the European scale, is a very heterogeneous country, recognized for its cultural, geographical, social and economic diversity (Barreto, 2007), where existing resources are not always explored in a sustainable, ethical way, nor with the desired economic acumen, capable of generating wealth for local communities. Therefore, we shall attempt to rescue the values of the Minho, and local knowledge, creating strategies for local socio-cultural and economic revitalization, using design as an agglutinate and promoter of useful knowledge for the valorization of its own territory, rescuing and innovating its languages through material culture: through the reinvention of the small scale, that of local artifacts, reinventing them in dialogue with the demands of a global market. In this way we explore design's vocation as a cultural mediator.

A possible understanding and application of the models may be carried out through tangible emblematic cases in the Minho. Persistently populous, smallholder, and still recognizable by the green and the waters, Minho's frontiers shape and expand themselves in a more complex, although diffuse, way. The cities reclaim consistent steps of environmental and cultural qualification; the industry wrestles for creativity and technological innovation; and farming reconverts itself into tourism (Bandeira, 2009).

In this sense, we face an over irrigated territory, with one of the youngest populations in Europe and an urban built heritage, in the city of Guimarães, which was classified in 2001 by the UNESCO, as World Heritage. "[...] three features characterize Minho, or make it unique, by their way, by their style, or by their intensity: the family model and the components around birth, which qualify it as the "nation's fecund breeding ground"; emigration, its "true demographic vocation" (Ribeiro, 1970, p. 438) and, lastly, the brimful religious and "festive exuberance" (Dias, 1970, p. 2" (in Gonçalves et al., 2009, p. 413).

To boost these factors with creativity is an emergent need, but it needs to be rescued through the knowledge of the place's experience, with the aim of reconstructing it with base in local matriarchal characteristics.

As previously referred, monitoring this territory with its characteristics allows establishing a strong identification with other contemporary territories. Called urban, its morphology presents a diffuse structure of territorial establishment, in a green context with no defined border, in

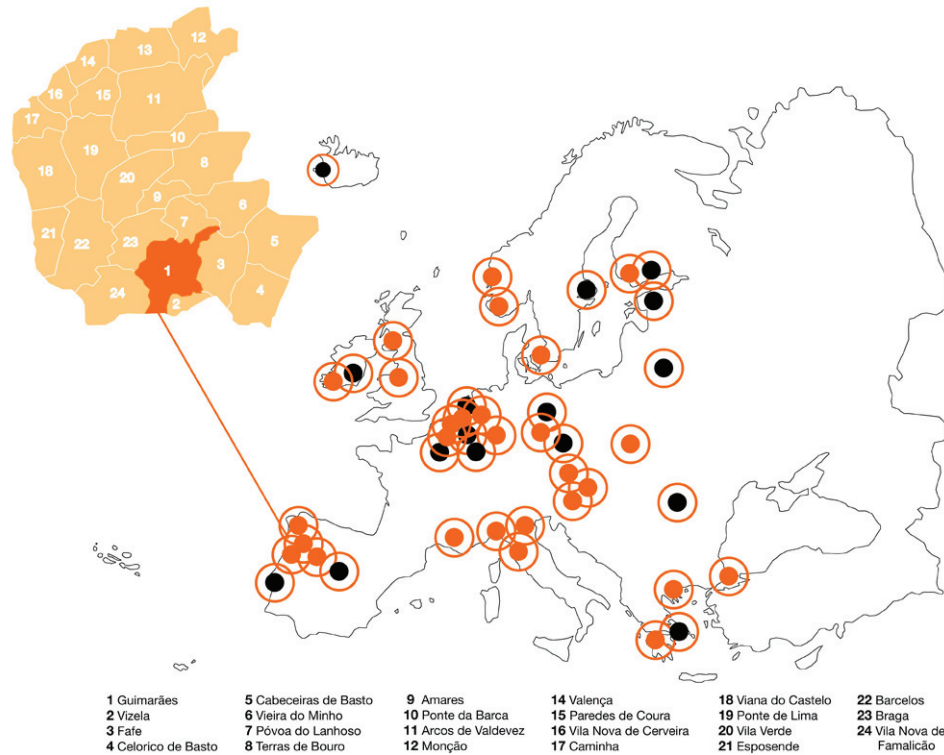


Figure 1. Minho in Europe.

which the population is scattered distributed among the traditional urban centers, which are a consequence of the region's urban settlements of pre-industrial origin. In this urban fabric the actives' pluriactivity triangle (Magalhães, 1984) – industry, farming and complementary activities associated with housing – is essential for its characterization, or survival, and strengthens its design.

To give legibility and intelligibility to the territory becomes the central work program in this research. The construction of a narrative about the place may become an observation instrument for the reading and understanding of the territory by its players. The territory's design is a reflex of the history of its social and economic organization. The territory's builders are its players, weaving a complex reality that is self-reproductive.

Design, in a strategic vision of interaction, presents itself here as a player that aspires, before everything else, to establish an intelligent dialogue with all the players, the agents in the continuous transformation of this territory, a transformation formed by the layers of territory, culture and society.

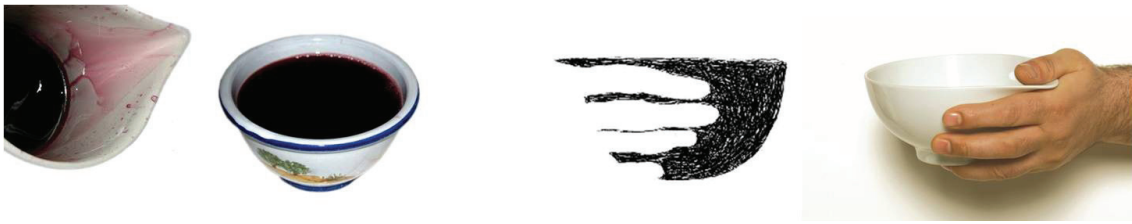
This exercise will seek to rescue the values of local knowledge in the Minho region, drawing socio-cultural and economic revitalization strategies, turning to design as a catalyst, an agglutinant and a stimulator of useful knowledge for the valorization of the territory itself, preserving and innovating its languages, through material culture.

Culture, with its origin in the Latin verb *colere*, means to cultivate the land and can be understood as the set of activities, beliefs and practices common to a society or a specific social group (Étienne, *in* Pereira, 2009). Also, implicit is the idea that culture allows to interpret the world. And to read the world is to recreate it. Through intelligence we may be able to use culture to conceptually and technologically research and innovate, to create under the aim to build and deliver contemporary cultural offers, which should be related to tangible and intangible heritage.

In this sense, material and immaterial aspects are involved in either tangible or intangible variables that, in their whole, condense themselves in contact points with their own territory, giving shape to experience, limiting it and maybe taking it to the memorable status.



Figure 2. Territory of Minho.



**Figure 3.** Innovating with tradition. Bowl, Francisco Providência designer.

Design, in this context, positions itself as an interface for communication between past and present, boosting a more intense experience of place, supporting an emotional relationship with space through the indexation of the body, and being able to reveal in it new perspectives of the world, which are carried by experience.

Experiences enable the construction of memories. Through the memory of positive experience, identities, which will always be in transformation processes, are reconstructed. The sharing of experiences is necessary for the identification of formal and emotional references – codes – that allow communication of sense and with sense. According to Fernando Pessoa “[...] it is through emotion and through the thought that emotion triggers, that man lives more really on earth, it’s true experience, and he registers it in the facts of his emotions and not in the chronicle of his scientific thought” (in Paviani, 1991, p. 91).

“If, concerning creative arguments, the 70’s were functional, the 80’s aesthetic and the 90’s environmental, the present century keeps the revelation of eco-design: the effort to integrate man in his environment, communities between themselves, the local into the global; it is not about producing light gasoline, but to review the entire relationship of man with the world, announcing a revolution which is not of objects, but of information, a culture and communication revolution” (Providência, 2009, p. 2).

This methodology, applied to the Minho territory, aspires to promote the territorial values already mentioned, as well as the biodiversity inherent to the territory, also identifiable in the complexity of its places, which, in its whole, produces possible dynamic synthesis that amplifies the territory’s values.

It is in this context that a strategic approach through design becomes pertinent: the one that according to Roda and Krucken (2004) places design as a discipline that is capable to prepare for the construction of architecture of value, naturally present in this territory.

### The project

#### The handcrafts of Guimarães as a reading key

Handcrafts, that is, objects manufactured using raw materials from a region, or from nearby, produced by one or more craftsmen with the help of their family, in a small workshop or in their own house, with the aim of trading or selling them (Costa and Melo, 1981, p. 145).

According to Rodrigues (2004) handcrafted artifacts correspond to the primitive stage on the evolution of technical objects, that is, the abstract stage. In this stage, the technical object is not distinguishable from the aesthetic object; the artifact is equally defined by its functionality and by its artistic expressiveness, which means that the technical experience and the aesthetic experience are inseparable. With the mass production of standardized objects, which is a consequence of the industrialization process, the technical experience is dissociated for the first time from the aesthetic experience, and the new stage of modern technicality is achieved.

Thus being, the stage of abstract technicality is a condition of handcrafts, and the stage of modern technicality is a condition of design. To make this blend, of abstract with modern, is the challenge issued in this statement.

In this project we seek to relate tangible and intangible heritage with contemporary cultural offers, through a reinterpretation of handcrafts by design. The goal is to allow for the social, economic and urban regeneration of this territory, by community involvement, revealing it to the world through a local space, that is: giving it visibility, by framing it in the Guimarães European Culture Capital 2012 event, through an exhibition, a publication, a spoken word event and an on-line shop.

Handcrafts are an art – the application of knowledge to obtain practical results – that was developed to solve everyday problems, through a knowledge acquired by local communities in order to survive. Throughout history, handcrafts developed creative processes needed for experience, for life and for geographical adaptation, seeking perfection – functional, technological and cultural – based also on the experience of its making and its usage, which allowed for a progressive improvement in the community’s quality of life.



**Figure 4.** Rescuing tradition.

Handcrafts conditioned the construction of this territory being, still today, very present in these places. However, it is also noticeable a lack of strategic vision for its economic and social viability, which is recognized as an opportunity for design as a manager for this process. Design, freeing itself from technology through the critical drawing it develops, through project, in the 18th century, acquired a conscience about its practice that handcrafts never had (Providência, 2009). In this way, our choice of handcrafts as a possible reading key and agent for the understanding of this complex reality, to be translated by design, as an inducer of experience in contemporaneity, is justified.

The requalification policies for Guimarães, in the scope of the European Capital of Culture, aimed at the social, urban and economic regeneration, will imply an open discourse that also strengthens the regeneration of people's experience, in order to find an alleged ecology again. In this transformation model, departing from the revisit of its identities, we will attempt to reintegrate the qualities of tradition transposing them into the future, transmitted by new consumption arguments, based in new products.

Handcraft is understood nowadays as material heritage that conveys, through its stories, immateriality – the relationship of people with the material world – the collective value, implying memory and tradition, will become a pretext for project in design, being able to obtain a fundamental role in an alter-globalization – a globalization based on people (Gebre, *in* Santos, 2003) – through its ability, shown throughout history, of relating people with places, something we find crucial for the construction of local cultural identities.

Design is suggested as an articulator of this complex process, in this context of innovating with tradition, seeking to give legibility and intelligibility to the territory, using, in this case, the Portuguese pragmatism defined by Eduardo Lourenço (*in* Osório, 1999), as an argument for the construction of a narrative shared by the set of players that draw the territory in order to allow for its reading, comprehension, translation and representation.

Portugal has a good argument in the play, each Portuguese is a nation, and symbolically each one can do what it pleases them, even in the most remote villages. The type of rural society is formed by small holders, a society of collective rites, but where each one is at and rules its own house. It is a pragmatic individualism; people are focused in things that are there to be useful (Lourenço *in* Osório, 1999).

Given that sustainable development is a balance between economic, financial, environmental and social objects, its implementation will be dependent upon a revolution of mentalities, a dissemination of new human behaviors or new ways of life (Providência, 2009).

Pragmatically considering handcrafts as the set of manufactured artifacts needed for survival, we propose in this project, as a critical and constructive process, to innovate by design reinventing the things that are needed by new publics. In this way, through the manipulation of memory, matter and technique, we intend to associate the practical, the needed and the useful, seeking simultaneously to provide beauty.

### Project as process

We propose, in this project, for design to translate handcrafts into contemporaneity, working the programs, the technologies and the shapes of desire, combining the efforts of all local players, private and public, involved in the process. As a goal, we intend for desire, through the process of design, to reach the purpose/intent of social, economic and urban regeneration, which is demanded to reverse the quality of life felt in this region.

The project will give equal importance to artifacts, devices and services, as well as to the methodological project processes, or to the materialization and manufacture systems, that is, to the creation processes. The creation processes themselves will become a research theme. In this perspective, the whole process shall be properly documented, through videographic and photographic records, or others that may become suitable.

The players directly involved in these projects will be: The 2012 Capital of Culture Society, the Guimarães City Council, the University of Aveiro, the University of Minho, the Oficina, the Guimarães Technological Park and several Craftsmen and Designers.

The traditional trades selected to reinterpret by design, in the scope of this project – embroidery, pottery, horn artifacts, cutlery, jewelry, tin artifacts – are those that still have a big presence in the territory, involving a great number of private players (craftsmen) and several public institutions.

A personal invitation will be addressed to ten designers to rethink how handcrafts may, nowadays, continue to be a process that is integrated in the community, framing it in the current economic and social structures. Technical innovation is a notion of economic and social nature and technical invention is a process of logical nature (Rodrigues, 2007).

The criterion for the selection of the designers will be, naturally, that of the relevance found in the relationship of their personal methodologies and aspirations with projectual processes, thus distinguishing themselves by the articulation with a framework of tangible and intangible cultural values. This means that the incorporation of the



Figure 5. Minho Handcraft.



**Figure 6.** Translation the handcraft to contemporaneity. Dress, Ana Salazar designer.

often tacit knowledge deeply acquired by local communities in order to survive will be valued.

Two technologies will be assigned to each designer for his or her creative interpretation that will have to achieve the referred pragmatic opportunity: the creation of needed things for new, properly defined, publics.

Methodologically, it is desirable that the products result from methodological processes of great intimacy between designers and craftsmen. The assigned technologies will be presented to the designers and the necessary contacts will be established with the craftsmen and the other players, already mentioned, in such a way as to make the project viable in time.

We suggest that the resources made up by the small workshops that exist in the city may be optimized, and also, that the Cruz de Pedra Pottery (with an approximate area of 100m<sup>2</sup>), which is a property of the Guimarães City Council, may be restored and work as permanent headquarters and interpretative center for this whole project.

The craftsmen will be in charge of the production of the pieces, under the artistic supervision of the designers and the technical supervision of Oficina, with the support, if it becomes necessary, of the Guimarães Technological Park and the University of Minho.

The visibility and the impact that this project may have in the territory, both at the local and at the global scale, will be strengthened by the 2012 Capital of Culture, through an exhibition/show; a book (triple catalogue of theoretical contextualization, process survey and artifacts' presenta-

tion); a spoken word event (during the session for the public presentation of results) and also through the launching of an on-line website, that may be indexed to the Capital of Culture website, in which a virtual shop will be included.

The website that will associate this project with Guimarães 2012 European Capital of Culture has the mission to communicate this Local project at the Global scale, allowing, through the on-line shop, to market the editions of the 20 artifacts produced, as well as the catalogue and other publications, besides promoting the cast of craftsmen and designers involved, and the handcrafts community, in a broader and more appropriate way for the present time, and the value of design as cultural mediator.

### Comments

The statement of Handcraft as a reading key for territorial values reveals the ability of Design – reinforcing its transdisciplinary appetite to be the manager of complexity, through its languages, incorporating metaphors as representations – to give visibility to the territory, through knowledge, which is also the synthesis of representations, giving back or adding value to it, this is, making it present.

In this exercise, the products that are created will reveal new approaches to usage, contributing for people's quality of life. These products will have a handcrafted look and will be built by ancestral techniques, which will reveal a local culture, which is, naturally, the reminiscence of a culture that doesn't exist anymore. The result is the blend



**Figure 7.** Culture and communication.

between old and new, between the genuine ancestry of traditional techniques and the new programs of an urban contemporary existence. It will be conditioned by the mobility of publics, by the lack of space in their houses, by the adoption of new cultural patterns, of new desires and ambitions. This is, of new lives.

Through the completion and communication of this project we intend, by this example, to trigger a systemic reaction, a series of other realizations within the social fabric, with positive consequences for the social economic and urban regeneration, with a territorial impact, that will have repercussions both in the short term, during the Guimarães 2012 European Capital of Culture and, above all, in the medium term and in the long run.

The demonstrative nature of this action at the local scale will certainly be a fundamental contribution for a possible model, or possible strategic typologies for sustainable development, to be implemented in contemporary territories, in a broader scale such as the European, being this also an intention consecrated by the current policies of the European Capital of Culture event, as pre-defined by the European Council.

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