

Handcraft, companies and education. Reflecting on this partnership in the Portuguese context

Artesanato, empresas e educação. Reflexão sobre as parcerias no contexto português

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Abstract

Design schools are herein presented as privileged local vertices, parts of a global brain, that is, as centers that accommodate research which is articulated with local culture, tangible with the observation of craftsmanship in dialogue with design's performance. Bearing this in mind, we present some research and teaching experiences in Portugal, through emblematic micro experiences articulated with the practice and knowledge that find their value in craftsmanship – *Old Knowledge. New Tendencies; Lightness, Reanimating the Filigree; 2nd Skin Cork Jewellery; Meanings of Matter in Design, Alentejo* – which have allowed the translation of the traditional knowledge of certain places and its conversion into reality. Liliana Guerreiro and Corque Design are successful companies that combine the work of a designer with craftsmen, taking advantage of the idiosyncrasies of a local dialogue which is extendable to a global world. In this study, the articulation of craftsmanship with the teaching of Design is regarded as a place for positive experiences, in the sense that this articulation produces a vector directed to the amplification of cultural values, to the underlying *Genius Loci* in places. The study of these experiences has confirmed the existence of an excellent opportunity built on the fact that craftsmanship in Portugal is a positive practice, implicitly and historically associated to the nature and construction of its places. This is a reality that can be observed and perceived by a significant portion of Portuguese production, also materialized in the industrial manufacturing clusters. This production, despite being considered frail in its organizational and economic structure, consists of small workshops, sometimes informal ones, of low technology but high quality in its manual work, where knowledge is conveyed through generations. In this context, the aforementioned experiences are evidence of a strong dialogue between designer and tradition; a dialoguing experience with local manufacture is expressed through innovative products. Whilst presenting these experiences we shall conduct a critical consideration, trying to understand the difficult dialogue between design, craftsmanship and the valorization of the territory.

Key words: meta-design, craftsmanship, cultural diversity, experience, company.

Resumo

As escolas de design são aqui apresentadas como locais privilegiados, funcionando como vértices e sendo parte de um cérebro global, isto é, como centros que acomodam pesquisa com cultura local, tangível com a observação de artesanato em diálogo com o desempenho do design. Dessa forma, apresentamos algumas experiências de pesquisa e ensino em Portugal através de estudos articulados entre prática e teoria cujo valor foi buscado no artesanato – *Old Knowledge. New Tendencies; Lightness, Reanimating the Filigree; 2nd Skin Cork Jewellery; Meanings of Matter in Design, Alentejo* – que permitiram a tradução e conversão do conhecimento tradicional em realidade. Liliana Guerreiro e Design Corque são empresas de sucesso que combinam o trabalho de designer com o do artesão, aproveitando as idiossincrasias de um diálogo local, que é extensível a um mundo global. Neste estudo, considera-se que o encontro do ensino do desenho junto com o ensino do design geram experiências positivas, no sentido de que esta articulação produz vetores de valores culturais, para ressaltar os *Genius Loci* dos lugares. Esta é uma realidade que pode ser observada e percebida através de uma parcela significativa da produção portuguesa, materializando-se também nos clusters de produção industrial. Esta produção, apesar de ser considerada frágil em sua estrutura organizacional e econômica, consistindo em pequenas oficinas, algumas por vezes familiares com baixa tecnologia, mas de alta qualidade em seu trabalho manual, onde o conhecimento é transmitido através de gerações. Neste contexto, as experiências acima mencionadas são evidências de um forte diálogo entre o designer e a tradição; são experiências de diálogo da produção local expressa na forma de produtos inovadores. Ao apresentar estas experiências vamos realizar uma reflexão crítica, tentando entender o difícil diálogo entre artesanato, design e valorização do território.

Palavras-chave: meta-design, artesanato, diversidade cultural, experiência, empresa.

Introduction

The present paper aims to study the association between craftsmanship, companies and the teaching of Design in Portugal. It results from an ongoing research, part of the doctoral program in Design at the University of Aveiro, entitled "The sense of Place. Valorization of territorial identity through design." In Portugal, the discussion around the promotion of values inherent to the territory uses traditional materials and knowledge in relation to contemporary industry as reading keys.

In this context, design schools are seen as strategic and privileged places used to foster an investigation articulated with local culture, tangible with the observation of craftsmanship's practice in dialogue with design's performance.

On a cultural perspective, the integration of craftsmanship themes in the teaching of Design seems particularly pertinent in Portugal, as this practice is historically tied to the nature and construction of its places. As we have mentioned before, this is a reality perceived by a significant portion of Portuguese production – probably being the prevailing economic system in Portugal, as referred to under *craftsmanship* in the *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira* – also materialized in the industrial manufacturing clusters.

From a socioeconomic point of view, it is important to salvage the idea of craftsmanship as a support activity to entrepreneurship and the idea of it being implicitly, in its form, part of a micro economy; these features are currently referred to in several areas of knowledge (Manzini, 2008; Santos, 2007; Sassen, 2010; Câmara, 2009) essential to the valorization and sustainability of the territory. The flexible, mobile and precarious nature of work relations that characterizes jobs in the second modernity is also a distinguished feature of craftsmanship as a traditional/rural craft.

Territory and Culture

The fragmented and dynamic territories of our days – a result of the acceleration of our perception of time through the exponential increase in speed at which information, goods and services travel as a result of globalization – are impatient and require swift action. There are constant social, ecological and cultural changes. Being that everything is urgent, pinpointing specific problems will enable swift action towards the valorization of territory, promoting local identity, with the purpose of making them alluring to people, enabling their social, economic and urban regeneration.

We perceive territory as a self-projecting *living being*, as a reflection of its history, culture, politics and economy, understandable solely in relation to society, that is, to people. Hence, the territory is, in this context, a place for civilization. The metaphorical idea of a *living social organism*, in which each inhabitant produces micro-impacts, states or positions the territory as a communicating body.

The challenge faced by cultural policies in our fast changing society, inhabited by an abundance of different cultures, is not the enhancement or narrowing of identities, but rather the challenge of taking advantage of its hetero-

geneous nature and the variety of messages within, enriching sociability, whilst giving added value to difference.

The value of identity as a living thing as an ever creating process is emphasized; a set of features that identify a community and a territory making it unique throughout time.

Here culture is introduced and seen as "[...] not that which is given by nature, but whatever is built by man; it should logically include industry, as well as media, the processes for producing rubber ducks, as well as the ways of love-making and amusement" (Eagleton, 2003, p. 51). One being to look upon culture as a living set of actions that includes every practice or activity regarding the transfer of knowledge, and common beliefs of a society or social group in particular. A complex system of sector knowledge transfer, which overlaps resulting in added value, as underlined by Bauman (1989, p. 315) "people are whatever they are taught to be."

According to Bauman (2011), Europe can be seen as a geographic area, a political entity and especially, a cultural reality where the greatest asset is diversity. These differences today, with crossed diasporas of immigrations, of differences between myself and the other, of neighboring. In Europe, the other is always present, like nowhere else and, as such, European culture knows no rest.

If living with difference is an inherent quality of Europe, it makes sense that material culture also reveals such differences, and that design is a reflection thereof. According to Andrew Blauvelt (2011, p. 13), we are "living in the age of relational and contextual design". If there is no hegemonic culture, it makes no sense to mass produce goods.

In contemporary reality there is a tendency towards the homogenization of the concept of global as we close the gap between cultures, and we increasingly believe that local differentiation is essential to the identity(ies) of places. Therefore, the idiosyncrasies of places are of key strategic importance to the contemporary ways of life (Sassen, 2010). In this view, we should look for idiosyncrasies, the differences that make places appealing to people. The study of local history, heritage and tradition plays a major role in our days, placing tradition at the core of what is inherent to the territory, as a feature enabling the differentiation of places (territorial and social), through their *translation* (Flusser, 2010) to contemporaneity (see Figure 1).

Territory, design and sustainability

Portugal, in relation to Europe, is a very heterogeneous country known for its cultural, geographic, social and economic diversity (Barreto, 2007), where the available resources aren't always exploited in a sustainable, ethical way or with the desirable economic visibility that one would require to generate wealth for local communities. "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission, 1987).

The environmental sustainability of the territory also depends on the sustainability of companies, which, in turn, enable not only the sustainability of their products but also that of the country's development. Each place is a specific combination of particular modes of production (Santos, 2007).



Figure 1. Local differentiation - global homogenization.

A significant part of Portuguese production is the work of small manufacturing industries, which bare a close resemblance (or sometimes none at all) to handcraft production. Such production is very frail in its organizational and economic structures; it is small scale, made of small, low technology workshops where manual production of great skill predominates – the old manufacturing techniques are still quite present in Portugal. We feel it is appropriate to state that 95.5% of Portuguese industry is a small scale business with less than 10 workers, amounting to 43.3% of the total industry workforce. These industries are small manufactures where, as noted above, the work process is very similar to handcraft. Medium scale industry in Portugal amounts to 4.2% of the total and employs between 10 and 249 workers. Only 0.3% of Portuguese industry is large scale, and it operates in the energy sector (Rosa and Chitas, 2010).

As Portugal is a country with over eight centuries of history, with a diverse and rich cultural legacy still identifiable in its territory, but poorly industrialized, the aim will be to enable its productive processes without turning to sophisticated and pompous technology, lending added value to traditional knowledge, manipulating memory, matter and technique. That is, to innovate through those traditions, creating difference from a place's reality, enabling the diversity of senses in places of a global world, capable of reflecting "universality without totality" (Canclini, 2008).

If, by definition, tradition is the oral transmission of facts, legends and so forth, across generations, that is to say, the act of "delivering, transmitting; delivery; transmission; teaching; relation; narrative; mention through erudition", according to the *Dicionário Etimológico da Língua Portuguesa* (Machado, 1977), and if Craftsmanship is the "manufacture of objects with local raw materials, produced by one or more craftsmen with the aid of their families in a small workshop or in their own house, with the aim of selling or trading them; [...] from the French *artisanat*" as detailed in the *Grande Dicionário de Língua Portuguesa* (Teixeira et al., 2004), we can thus infer that Craftsmanship is any mental production that precedes drawing, part of an economic activity that promotes difference and the representation of traditional experience.

"The experience of tradition is one which gives us a sense of belonging, because, as with our native tongue, it is gradually acquired without being explained to us" (Rodrigues, 2007, p. 6).

Design as a cultural mediator and agent for a semantic reassembling of local culture, is identified in this context as meta-design, as a communication mediator between an inherited past and the construction of a desired future, reorganizing the values of traditional knowledge restoring their meaning in contemporaneity.

We believe to have thus justified the relevance of design as a discipline adding value to contemporary productions, making use of craftsmanship knowledge.

Meta-design, craftsmanship, experience and companies

From this perspective, and as we limit our research, we believe new work methods can be found, combining craftsmanship and design, with the ability to adjust ancestral knowledge to contemporary reality, in a way that such a relation may be established as a strategic axis in the valorization and development of territories. Our aim is to identify some features and procedures contributing to the creation of knowledge multipliers, leading to the renewal and development of technical and human work conditions, as productive and organizational work processes characteristic of each place or region, adapting them to the needs, desires and values of new audiences.

We aim to create a useful model to approach the valorization of territories, promoting the implementation of projects in Portugal – with the possibility of application in other territories –, in which design functions as a translator to traditional knowledge, namely, of craftsmanship in contemporaneity.

In this context, we wish to understand how the teaching of Design in Portugal has been promoting and amplifying knowledge connected to the ancestral/pluri-secular Portuguese crafts, creating and embodying this territory's cultural "diversity", which are necessary to the survival and sustainability of Portuguese contemporary industry in the fragmented context(s) of our contemporaneity.

In Portugal, we can find thirty four schools that teach design. In the last decade, some of these schools have been developing projects that valorize the territory introducing, in their curricula, exercises that aim to look closer at the territory, introducing craftsmanship as a theme and, sometimes, even establishing partnerships with companies in Portugal.

By introducing craftsmanship in Design curricula we promote the act of cultural interpretation, which, in this particular case, represents: from an aesthetic point of view, the differentiation of handcrafts; from a corporate point of view, entrepreneurship and autonomy; from an economic point of view, the use of scarce resources towards the provision of goods to satisfy human needs; and also, from a technological point of view, the mastering of techniques. We can also point out that, from a corporate point of view, craftsmanship is also the ability to, in an autonomous way, identify a need and find the skill to produce a solution to quench it.

With this in mind, we would like to list some experiences of research and teaching featuring the theme of craftsmanship: *Nuance and Memory of the Future*; *Re/vent the Matter*; *Feeling Planet Earth*; *Arouca + Sustainability*; *Ways of Life*; *Old Knowledge. New Tendencies*; *Lightness, Reanimating the Filigree*; *2nd Skin Cork Jewellery*; *Experience the Countryside*;

Meanings of Matter in Design. All of these enabled the incorporation of traditional knowledge of certain places, and its translation to the present time (Figure 2).

We would like to highlight two of these experiences: *Lightness, Reanimating the Filigree* promoted by the Escola Superior de Artes e Design (ESAD) of Matosinhos and *Meanings of Matter in Design* promoted by SUSDESIGN, that generated two successful small companies, founded by two designers that became entrepreneurs in the Portuguese industry while enjoying the idiosyncrasies of a local dialogue extendable to a global world (Figure 3).

Lightness, Reanimating the Filigree is a project developed within the scope of a degree in Design | Jewelry of the ESAD – Matosinhos, in the year of 2002, lead by the teacher and designer Ana Campos in coordination with the Museum

of Gold of Travassos, located in the municipality of Póvoa do Lanhoso, in the north of Portugal. “The ESAD, working with the art/design interface introduced new project propositions leading to the serial production of works that made it possible to have an itinerant exhibition. The Museum of Gold acted as a mediator between the traditional practice of local smiths and the increment of current design. Working together, the aim was to reinterpret and revitalize the filigree, trying to boost the production of the Póvoa de Lanhoso smiths, to show how rooted it is in Portugal. [...] This project was pursued according to what Augé calls *overmodern thought*, questioning the current consequences of the over dimension of distinct features of modernity, considering that the foundations for the introduction of new creative dynamics can be found in the memory of Humanity, working

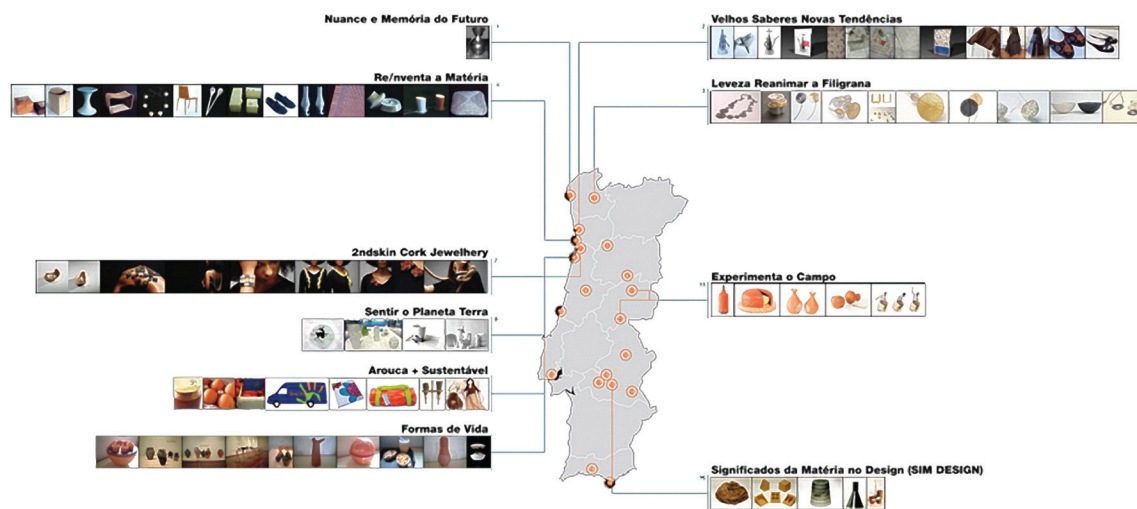


Figure 2. Design teaching experiences in Portugal. Craftsmanship as an agent leading to a practice.

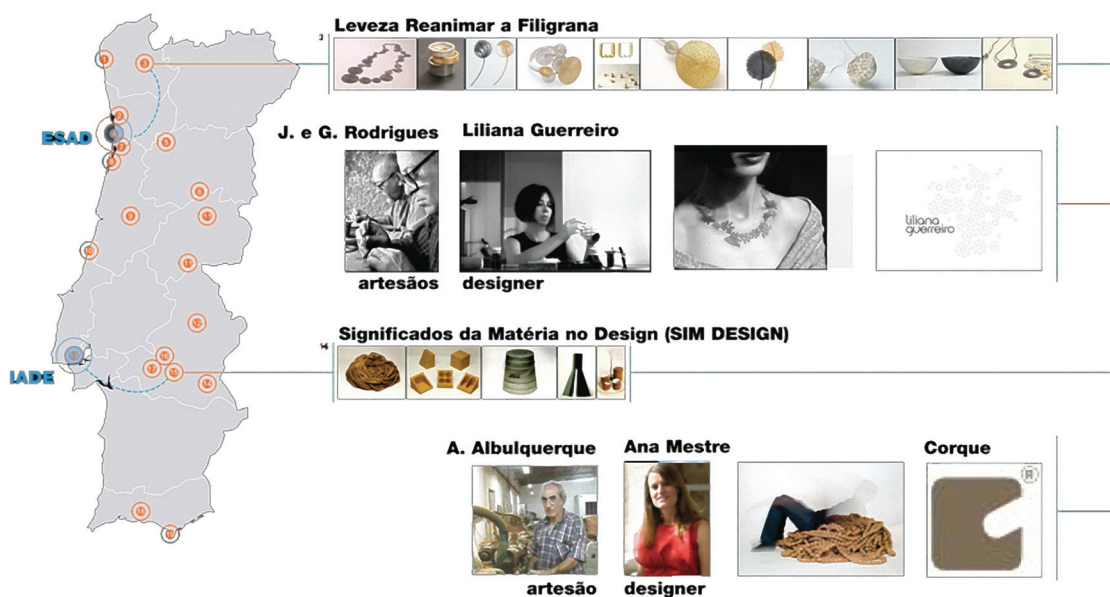


Figure 3. From experiences to the creation of two companies: Liliana Guerreiro and Corque.

with it and recycling it, transforming it in a material that can be used to build projects" (Campos, 2004, p. 10) (Figure 4).

Meanings of Matter in Design, Alentejo is a project that started in 2004, in line with the Design for Sustainability program, promoted by SUSDESIGN, with the purpose of developing research, design and training involving several players: designers, craftsmen, researchers and the academy. This project began with an exploratory research into: three regions – Estremoz, Évora and Montemor-o-Novo –; materials – clay, cork, wicker, wood, rock, tin-plate –; techniques used by craftsmen – pottery, cork work, basketry, joinery, rock work, tin work - enabling, through the manipulation of matter and techniques, the sustainable development of new products, in such a way that they may contribute to the well-being of people (Ruivo *et al.*, 2005) (Figure 5).

The experiences above are the expression of an intense dialogue between the designer and tradition; a dialoguing experience with local manufacture is expressed in innovative products, using traditional knowledge or plurisecular traditional materials in its production procedures. The *Liliana Guerreiro* brand was born from the *Lightness*, *Reanimating the Filigree* experience, and the *Corque Design* brand from the *Meanings of Matter in Design* experience. Both companies make use of design as an assembler and driving force for knowledge useful to the valorization of the territory, rescuing and innovating its languages through material culture, through the reinvention of small scale, of local artifacts, reinventing them in dialogue with the demands of a global market.

Liliana Guerreiro and *Corque Design* (Figures 6 and 7) produce their work exclusively in Portugal. Both companies



Figure 4. Artifacts produced by the *Lightness*, *Reanimating the Filigree* experience.



Figure 5. Artifacts produced by the *Meanings of Matter in Design* experience.



traditional portuguese jewellery | north of Portugal

Liliana Guerreiro designer

Figure 6. Handcrafts with filigree – Portuguese traditional technology – by the Liliana Guerreiro company.



Corque design

"Fup" pouffe, "Lagarta" and "String" pouffe

Figure 7. Handcrafts with cork – Portuguese traditional material – by the Corque company.

are privileged to have their work chosen for the MOMA in New York and it is currently on sale at the museum's shop. These companies represent, however, different realities regarding the integration of materials and traditional knowledge in the industry and the approach to markets. Liliana Guerreiro, designer in the company with the same name, still works around the workshop theme and with the Travassos craftsmen, and has established herself in the market through the development of new products, translating into contemporaneity the traditional Portuguese filigree jewelry. These products were very well received by the Portuguese market, allowing the creation of a company arising from the need imposed by product sales (Figure 8).

Corque Design has established itself on the market through the development of products using cork. This brand derives from *SUSDESIGN*, a company promoting design research and the development of products. With the *Meanings of Matter in Design* experience, the designer Ana Mestre realized how cork could be used as a raw material in the creation of new products, finding new ways to use cork, of which Portugal is the largest worldwide producer (Figure 9).

The *Liliana Guerreiro* company was founded following a sale success. Today, 60% of its production is absorbed by the Portuguese market whilst the remaining 40% are absorbed mainly by Spain, Switzerland, Austria and growing in Germa-

ny, Hungary, Belgium, England, Japan and the United States of America. Liliana Guerreiro says that only now is she thinking about her business as a company and that she should have started sooner, in terms of promoting and creating distribution networks. The company is comprised solely of three workers, being one of them the designer, Liliana Guerreiro. The remaining two workers craft the products and were trained by the company. It is based in Paredes de Coura and still works in association with two craftsmen in Travassos.

Corque Design was founded in 2009, as a brand of *SUSDESIGN*. The company, comprised by five workers and based in Lisbon, is in charge of the production, research and development of cork products, which either the company creates or outsources. Presently, fifteen companies, all north of the Tagus river, are producing *Corque Design* projects. The company was founded under the clear idea of the need to have a brand in order to develop products. *Corque* also promotes the distribution along with commercial agents. The network of production and distribution is very important at *Corque Design*, a company that clearly positions itself in the global market exploring and lauding a material, looking for the best partners for each step of the process. Currently, 70% of its production is absorbed by the foreign market, namely in Finland, England, Belgium, Spain, the United States of America and Japan (Figure 10).



Figure 8. Artifacts produced by the Liliana Guerreiro company.



Figure 9. Artifacts produced by the Corque company.

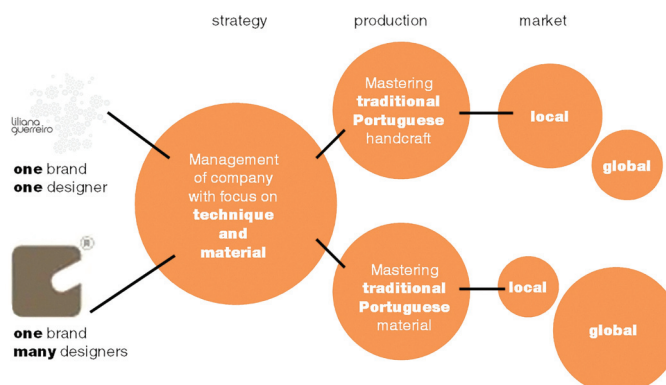


Figure 10. Strategy, production and market for both companies: Liliana Guerreiro and Corque.

Final remarks

In both study cases, design is taken as the uniting force of a complex process, of innovating with tradition, trying to add readability and intelligibility to the territory, building narratives shared by all players, who redefine the territory enabling its reading, comprehension, translation and representation.

These examples showed us that, through creative intelligence, culture can be used to research and innovate, conceptually and technologically, to create with the aim of constructing and making cultural contemporary products, which are desirably related to a material and immaterial heritage. They also showed us that it is possible to use traditional knowledge and materials to explore a contemporary presentation of traditions, and that the designer, as an author, transcends his or her function as an interpreter and translator, and builds his or hers representations, presenting them in models, which in turn will be interpreted. Hence, both material and immaterial aspects are involved in tangible and intangible variables which, as a whole, are condensed in relation with the territory itself, shaping experience, conditioning it and possibly taking it to a memorable status.

These two study cases show that the mastery of ancestral techniques and their flexibility can, within the current local and global framework, be an opportunity to regenerate, recover and upgrade the Portuguese industry, as nowadays the demand is for a great flexibility of production. However, they are not representative of the professional choices of Portuguese young designers entering the labor market, as the majority lacks initiative and entrepreneurship. According to 2011 data from the *Associação Nacional de Direito ao Crédito* (National Association for the Right to Credit), in Portugal, craftsmanship and decorating is the fourth economic activity of micro-business, amounting 8.1% of all Portuguese micro-businesses, whilst designers, architects, painters, sculptors and other professionals coming from a Fine Arts School amount only 1.9%.

This approach aims to contribute towards an ongoing research, whose ambition is to decode a dialogue of processes in which the designer interacts with the features and nature of local knowledge, in the form of craftsmanship. It aims to combine its pragmatic, performance, programmatic, open, experiential, participative and collaborative features, already claimed by design as its own defining and striking features.

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