

# Convention versus contemporaneity: the affordances of design-led mediation towards sustaining an ancestral cycle of linen making in Castelões, Portugal

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## Abstract

This article discusses the emerging affordances of a research-led mediation process that is currently being developed in Castelões, a parish in the Viseu region of Central Portugal. The mediation, a part of an ongoing doctoral project in Design, focuses on creating a semantic framework for the resignification of the term “innovation”, specifically in contexts of traditional making. Its objective is not to break with the past, but to extend its interpretation as a leverage for generating contemporarily relevant value and meaning – in this case, in and with vulnerable communities of practice.

The practice, popularly referred to as a “from seed to towel” production cycle is an ancient tradition kept alive in Castelões, which covers more than twenty manual stages of linen-making – from planting flax seeds to weaving fabric on handlooms. A distinguishing feature here is that unlike in other linen making cultures, the practitioners of Castelões are typically cognizant of, and adept in, each stage of the production cycle. This specialized knowhow is unique and has been passed through generations of predominantly women practitioners. Linen production once prevailed throughout the Portuguese territory, especially in the northern and central regions, however, in recent years, it has drastically declined due to a variety of unmitigated local and global factors, leaving Castelões as one of the few – if barely – remaining centres where artisanal linen-making is still in practice and can still be observed empirically.

The urgency for a multi-agent approach to mediation within this context is underlined by the fact that the practice base is critically low: four practitioners, each of an advanced age, who embody the knowledge of the process in its entirety, and are, therefore, both principal protagonists and veritable assets for restorative intervention. The study, therefore, finds further thematic alignment with the conference track’s emphasis on care, wherein equal emphasis is laid on intangible human and social facets of heritage preservation as processual or material ones.

Correspondingly, the project argues that *quid pro quo* understanding between market forces and technology under premises of progress in the modern day has had a significant impact on the way objects are produced and consumed. In this regard, it agrees with the assessment that “programmed obsolescence is driving industrial growth”, which is consequently putting constant and inordinate pressure on makers to keep reinventing themselves – in terms of identity and praxis.

For small-scale making, and especially in the case of traditional industries that depend on manual processes honed over centuries, a fundamental non-conformity with the underpinnings of such conditioned progress is a palpable point of conflict that is culminating in either the loss of authenticity or instigating suspension of practice altogether, due to consequent economic untenability. The paper accordingly discusses what would ‘innovation’ or ‘newness’ mean in such contexts where there is an obvious lack of congruence between local and global realities.

## Author keywords

Design Research; Heritage preservation; Linen Cycle; Territory and Identity; Cultural Sustainability.

## Introduction

This article presents a mediation process developed in Castelões – a parish in the municipality of Viseu, in central Portugal, – led by a PhD research project in Design that focuses on creating a semantic framework for understanding the concept of “innovation” within traditional cultures, specifically in contexts of artisanal production.

The aim of this approach is not to break with the past, but to propose a reconciliation between tradition and contemporaneity in Creative Cultural Industries (CCI), what is understood by this study is that often this relationship (tradition – contemporaneity) can be wrongly perceived and presented as antagonistic. In this sense, the project proposes to broad-



en the interpretation of 'new', and relatedly, 'innovation' as a basis for generating new meanings, relevance, and value - in this case, in and with communities of vulnerable practices.

The knowledge and practice of linen production in Castelões (1414 inhabitants, in 2021) (Portal Do INE, n.d.) are presently sustained by a small group of women practitioners carrying the legacy of centuries-old traditions of flax cultivation and processing, and correspondingly, artisanal manufacturing of linen fabric. Linen production was once prevalent throughout the Portuguese territory, especially in the northern and central regions, however, in recent years it has drastically declined due to a variety of unmitigated local and global factors, leaving Castelões as one of the few centers where handmade linen is still technically in practice, and can be observed empirically.

In this regard, the project has put emphasis on incorporating ethnographic techniques such as participant observation in its methodological approach to not only derive the required empirical data from a case study perspective, but also to foster a space of trust, bonding, and co-creation with the respective community of practice. The group, formally known as the Association of Women Agriculturists from Castelões (*Associação das Mulheres Agricultoras de Castelões*) is a non-profit institution founded in 1997 dedicated to the cultivation and processing of linseed into linen fabric. When the investigation began, the association was at risk of disappearing, mainly due to the advanced age of the artisans, but also because of the lack of apprentices from younger demographics in the region - who were generally disinterested in an activity that was perceptibly connected with the past and connoted more precarious times. In this context, the project recognized the criticality of preserving such a unique ecosystem of linen-making, to which it responded by initiating a series of design-led collaborative activities aimed at scaffolding community-driven reestablishment, and through developing research infrastructure for facilitating sustained social and cultural innovation.

The study component in this case, therefore, began by focusing on comprehending the various phases of the flax cycle, getting to know the main protagonists and the surrounding members of the community, observing the potential for development and exploration of the territory's identity, and by working to transform local needs into results that were concrete and relevant towards the continuity and permanence of the specialized know-how.

### **Contextual background: Linen-making in Castelões**

Flax has traditionally been cultivated as a common food and fiber crop in Continental Portugal, with studies suggesting its prevalence in these regions since at least as far back as the pre-Roman period (Oliveira, Galhano & Pereira, 1991) when the industry was "organized in a predominantly rural system of production using rudimentary technical means" (Sequeira & Melo, 2012). Elsewhere in continental Portugal and the Iberian Peninsula, historical evidence points to an even earlier occurrence, such as in Algarve (2000 BC) and in the province of Almeria in southeastern Spain (2500 BC), establishing an indivisible provenance between the practice and the territory (Oliveira, Galhano & Pereira 1991).

In keeping with tradition, the cycle of linen making in Castelões is a fully manual and artisanal process that imbibes empirical systems of knowledge developed over centuries

and passed down through generations as both heritage and a life skill. The artisans recall that in their childhood, flax was still a regular aspect of everyday life: a significant portion of the surrounding lands was used in its cultivation, and most families kept a bit of the produce for their own consumption. Each village also had at least one designated weaver who would transform yarn to fabric. The artisans remember their mothers and grandmothers weaving flax, while they would help around with auxiliary tasks such as splitting the husk from the seeds using their teeth. In this way, the working of flax often involved the entire family.

With wide scale shifts in agricultural technologies coming into effect during the 20th Century, alongside correspondingly evolving consumer preferences and sectoral outlooks, the preference of linen as an essential crop abated, bringing with it a gradual decline in both production and the practice base. The Association of Women Agriculturists from Castelões was, therefore, founded in 1997 with a mission to preserve and reinstate the traditional process of linen making in the region. The initiative was put in motion by a course on family farming organized by the Municipality for Castelões residents, which reintroduced predominantly the women members of the community to growing, spinning, and weaving flax. The association began with 30 members on board, all women, and was centered in a facility owned by *Santa Casa de Misericórdia*, a non-governmental organization, with minimal resources and little or no access to electricity, water, or heating. Conditions had barely improved since, and the association lost a significant majority of its members over the years to death or ill health.

When the doctoral project made its initial approaches to the community, the number of practicing members had reduced to four, aged between 69 and 88, however, despite the perceivable complexities faced over the years, these four artisans showcased remarkable resilience towards keeping the practice and the knowledge system alive.

At that moment the research became acutely aware that the ongoing depopulation in the region along with a general apathy of younger community members towards the traditional practice presented a critical and untenable situation, the resolution of which would require a sensitive prospection of opportunities towards a dignified reinstatement. This premise oriented the corresponding research actions, emplacing the protagonists as anchors of restorative intervention, and as critical assets to the process of heritage management.

### **On convention versus contemporaneity**

A theoretical objective of the doctoral research in question is to examine the constructs of the terms, 'innovation' and 'newness', and their interpretation from distinctive perspectives. It argues that such phenomenographic approach may be required to bring focus to the inherent polysemantic nature of the terms, and thereby, critique their reductive use in common parlance, specifically in contexts of industry - which the project posits is mandating inflated and unsustainable cyclical relationships between production and consumption, and normalizing damaging practices such as planned obsolescence which are then being deemed necessary for further innovation. The study, accordingly, subscribes to Lipovetsky's observation that the society today has become "hyper-consumerist", entailing a "multiplication of experience" driven by "the intoxication of new sensations and emotions" (Lipovet-

sky, 2007) – which may actively marginalize social, cultural, and human values accrued in ecosystems of traditional making, thereby, affecting their relevance to modern economy and industry.

Therefore, the exploration and documentation of tangible and intangible wealth residing within the linen making culture at Castelões became a key aspect of mediation for the study, towards securing a future for the practice and its practitioners. It sought to foreground the atemporal character of the craft, its contributions to industrial, material, and cultural heritage, and the durability of its offerings, as a means to defend its significance to related contemporary discourses, and to sustain its agency towards affecting and informing change.

Elsewhere in the world, comparable efforts are in motion to bring back public attention to nuance and human values. There is indication of a growing appreciation for handmade produce as campaigns like the maker movement in the UK, and DIY in the USA suggest (Borges 2011). Slow movement spin-offs such as slow fashion (Fletcher, 2010), especially in the UK, are taking root in popular culture and consumption. Slow design (Strauss & Fuad-Luke, 2008), similarly, makes a call to action for design to refocus on the “trinity of individual, socio-cultural, and environmental well-being”, citing the importance of “slower human, economic, and resource flow metabolisms” to personal and environmental health. The manual process of linen-making at Castelões is a natural example of such reflective stances. The depth of its history, the exclusivity of its outcomes, and an obvious human connect are all attributes that instead of being feted, are earnestly working against the best interests of the community. In order to push for reconciliation, thus, the project had to reframe its standpoint, from top-down to bottom-up, that would allow the context instead to shape its own perception.

Borges (2011) in denouncing the conception that the ability to think creatively is exclusive to individuals with formal education, makes a note of how for communities of traditional practice, especially for those belonging to economically and/or socially marginalized sections, the desire to project their legacy is not driven by regressive nostalgia, but by the conviction that the knowledge that they imbibe is valuable heritage, and can drive fairer and more equitable development. The possibility of finding voice and representation, in this case, would constitute a sufficient interpretation of innovation – as an opportunity for renewal and continuity. In conjunction, Davis (1979) points out that “the public appetite for nostalgia can be considered as a socially adaptive mechanism which helps recover from sociocultural discontinuities and imbalances caused by radical social changes”, however, the study from the position of a design research intervention maintains its skepticism of nostalgia as becoming a definitive resolution to the occurring conflict between convention and contemporaneity in Castelões.

Xue and Woolley (2013) define nostalgia as “links with past memories or experiences, which seem to be in opposition to being innovative – a characteristic usually associated with good design,” however, they also acknowledge that nostalgia can make it easier for individuals and societies to retain identities in the aftermath of paradigm shifts. The research, respectively, principally agrees with their assessment that nostalgia is primarily a memory-based experience, and in the case of people who do not share a certain memory, they do not always have the need for (or are themselves) an effective source of

nostalgia, and consequently cannot fully feel the effects of change or recognize correlations with their own history. This is a major reason for the dissociation of the younger generations in the community with the craft, and that is why, the research argues that humanizing technology and recovering valuable cultural and emotional aspects of the past can offer better prospects for traditions to continue into modernity.

### Methodological Approach

As iterated, it was important for the research, from the perspective of design, to assume a reflective stance that was expressly non-coercive and non-imposing, and which scaffolded a variety of exploratory actions pertaining the re-signification of identity. Co-creation led methods were strategically implemented for meeting specific community needs, for instance, towards establishing a common space where the artisans alongside other local actors and stakeholders such as farmers, administrators, commercial entities, and students could freely discuss and work together to identify, and subsequently, address challenges and opportunities.

In retrospection, the ethnographic component of the study can be seen as divided between two key phases. This division was unplanned and the transition between the two was organic. The research perspective at the beginning of the intervention, during the first phase, was primarily etic – corresponding to developing a general understanding of the context and involving non-participatory observation, informal and semi-structured collection of oral histories, and photographic documentation of tools and processes. In the course of this phase, a number of intermediary measures were considered, such as the integration of traditional weaving into contemporary design and fashion as a basis for articulating tradition with modernity. However, during such deliberations, it became clear that the cultural and historical aspects of flax production in the region needed to be comprehended and contextualized in order to safeguard the practice’s authenticity and potentially generate further, and even unexpected value propositions. Hence, a more hands-on approach was required, that imbibed the perspective of the research subjects – an outlook which consequently led to the researcher actively learning and participating in all stages of linen production as a member of the community, which eventually helped nurture an emic perspective. In this period of three years, the researcher made contact and collaborated extensively with the wider community in Castelões, including local inhabitants and figures of authority, and was able to create a space of mutual trust and confidence.

### Ongoing actions, results, and findings

A key milestone for the mediation process has been the possibility to acquire and establish a new association headquarters. Housed at a former primary school belonging to the municipality, the space is bigger, with significantly better amenities, organization, and working conditions. It can not only accommodate processual tools and equipment such as handlooms, but it also serves as an environment for learning and connecting. A series of strategic intra and inter community meetings, for instance, has been organized in the location for purposes of networking and conceptualization.

The second important development emerging from the mediation is the co-design of a visual identity (branding) for the community of artisans (Figure 1). Named AmaCastelões



Figure 1. Branding related materials co-developed with the practice community.

(Love Castelões), the identity is designed to reflect a deep semantic connection with its territory and provenance and has been created with the intention to generate social, symbolic, and economic value for the local community. Upon launch, it was observed that the branding exercise soon evolved into a localized movement, driven by an intensely positive response from the wider community, which became a moment of catharsis for the artisans. Reflections gathered correspondingly, indicate a sense of empowerment derived from the greater acknowledgement of their work as professionals, and their contribution towards safeguarding (and now, projecting) the cultural and industrial legacies of the village and the region.

Respectively, the gains from the above two milestones paved the way for the third, and arguably, the most significant accomplishment for the research. With burgeoning public interest in the practice, the project found it opportune to shift focus to a critical need – expanding the practice base. A series of workshops and open days were organized at the new association headquarters, which brought in a surprisingly high number of younger community members willing to learn from the old masters about their craft, and who were driven not as much by nostalgia but by a sense of association, structure, and personal responsibility towards perpetuating the underlying empirical wisdom.

At present, the number of practicing members has increased from four to seventeen. The new headquarters are

serving well as a space of active learning and exploration pertaining to the production of linen; weaving and embroidery techniques; and new product development for expanding outreach to newer potential markets. A further number of exploratory activities are in motion that are dedicated to process optimization and the integration of new tools. The space also regularly hosts meetings and workshops on the theme, and the project in the coming months is scheduled to organize lectures and visits by international entities connected with traditional making, and pedagogic workshops with university students in conjunction with the practice community.

## Discussion

Bringing together different perspectives on innovation is critical to inform related public discourse and policy on the effects of a generalized outlook, such as direct and spillover implications to economy, culture, and the environment. Only by taking differing views of innovation into account is it possible to formulate theoretical frameworks that genuinely support sustainable and inclusive development. It is important for the practice of design to be sensitive to the polysemic nature of concepts such as innovation, wealth, and value, and to consider how interpretations can be used strategically to maximize one set of gains (for example, processual or economic) without compromising another (social or environmental).

The project, additionally, posits that while enshrining traditional artefacts and passive depictions of past activities in museums may help preserve the memory of traditional practices, channeling research towards understanding and activating the underlying values can help retain their relevance to contemporaneity; and provide the associated maker communities a sustainable basis to continue building on their contributions to economy, culture, territory, and identity.

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