



# **GLEANNING AND SHARING KNOWLEGDE:**

**Three Public Art Projects based  
on Interaction Practices**

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## ABSTRACT

This research addresses the domain of public art focused on participatory design and co-design, grounded on an integrated perspective of place perceived in its complexity – relating to human, geographical, economic, biophysical, political, historical, cultural and ecological dimensions that widely characterize local life experiences. It is rooted on the connection between labour activities and local natural resources locally revealed. Considering place the primary concept, and its construction around labour, the diverse aspects of place are seen primarily as being connected with labour in that physical place. Three projects developed in South and South-eastern regions of Portugal will be analyzed. In order to create an open model to involve local people to participate in the projects, a practice-based research was experimented using an emphatic approach anchored on models of listening and dialoguing. This work begins with the three projects description, namely Paths of Salt, Artistic Interactions with Cacela Velha and Creative Practices around the Production of Cork. This is followed by the concepts of cultural and social dimensions of sustainability which are crucial for the sustainable community development. Finally, the three projects will be examined through the emphatic approach of listening and dialoguing as strategies of improving knowledge and people's quality of life in its relation with the environment.

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### Keywords:

Place  
Natural resources  
Labour  
Empathetic approach  
Cultural Sustainability

This research focuses the realm of public art centered on participatory design and co-design, rooted on an integrated perspective of place understood in the inter-relation of its human, geographical, economic, biophysical, political, historical, cultural and ecological dimensions that extensively define local people life experiences (Reaes Pinto, 2013).

It is grounded on the relation between local natural resources and labour activities existing in the territory. Considering place as constructed around labour as the primary concept, the diverse aspects of place are seen primarily as being connected with labour in that place. The connections between their users and the local natural resources are crucial for the construction of communities as far as it organizes the place in its economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects (Reaes Pinto, 2013).

The projects presented here are developed in South and South-eastern regions of Portugal, namely Algarve and Alentejo. Two have already been completed, in Algarve – Castro Marim, with salt producers, and in Cacela Velha, with mostly retired fishermen and women. Currently a project is being developed in Azaruja (Alentejo) with cork workers and other local people, with the collaboration of two researchers.

The practice-based research is anchored on an emphatic approach of listening and dialoguing as a way of engaging local people in the projects.

It is also important to outline the objective of developing projects based on the residents' experience of place, namely from the labour activities, and its raw material, which structure the place in its diversity of dimensions, giving them voice through a cultural and social sustainable development.

# Project Description

Paths of Salt, Artistic Interactions with Cacela and Creative Practices around the Production of Cork are three projects that have been carried out in places which are strongly characterized by the relationships between the physical subsistence of their residents and the local natural resources. Thus, these way of life are marginalized by the logic of hegemonic globalization (Reaes Pinto, 2013).

Their territory – also taking into account landscape – is understood as an expression of certain ways of living that are no longer widespread and which have even become marginalized, to which the land and sea are essential natural resources.

This lifestyle reverberates with the daily work routines of a community or group of people of a given place. In this perspective, these routines are a form of knowledge. The concept of place is here understood as a space with history, meanings, memories and experiences (Reaes Pinto, 2013)

Therefore, the idea of place is crucial as a way of learning about how people interact among themselves and with their environment. Paths of Salt explored the salt marshes, with the salt producers. This activity has been carried out since the Roman occupation and has been maintained until now.

This labour had a peak of production in the sixteenth century. Salt was exported and this was used in salting tuna and preserving other foods.



Artistic Interactions with Cacela Velha investigated fishing activity and bivalve harvesting with retired fishermen and women. This locality has always been characterized by fishing activity as well as by the activity of bivalve farming. Practically all the inhabitants of Cacela Velha lived from their activities in the sea, the estuary and / or agriculture.

Creative Practices around the Production of Cork studied cork labour activities with active and retired workers in all stages of the cork process as practiced in Azaruja. Cork labour activity in Portugal dates back to the 18th century with the regular cultivation of cork forests, and it has been one of the main raw materials for the production of objects and for the development of the region in economic, social and cultural terms.

In Azaruja, since the end of the 20th century, due to poor political decisions and globalization, cork factories have decreased from 24 to 5, leading to an impoverishment of economic and social conditions. This was one of the central problems that stimulated our desire to initiate the social innovation process. By focusing on local culture as well as labour activity, the knowledge of the whole process has been gathered.

In all projects the methodology was based on participatory actions that were decisive for the objectives we set ourselves - engaging a large number of representatives from the local cultural community. Therefore, the artistic projects were developed with local people that could play the role of empirical designers, especially in the project realized in Azaruja.

In all projects the central point was to give public recognition to those involved, show off the value of their labour activities in a dignified form and stimulate the deep knowledge about salt, fishing, cork and all the related knowledge that the community already has. In Creative Practices around the Production of Cork project, this knowledge was also used to begin the development of some kind of object. In substance, the aim was to create a workgroup composed of design experts and non-experts with the intention of developing cork know-how and the emergence of new creative solutions. Another singularity of all the projects presented here is the symbolic meaning of the entire process and its result, as it belongs to the domain of public life, citizenship and politics.

In this context, several participatory actions were done with different generations in the communities of Castro Marim, Cacela Velha and Azaruja. Workshops in the fields of sculpture, stop-motion, photography and assemblage were developed with young people, always in relation to salt, fishing and cork, and all that is related to them as well as, in the case of the Azaruja project, encounters between younger people and adults (Fig. 1).

Both with the young population as with adults and seniors, one of the major objectives of the participatory activities was to think about Castro Marim, Cacela Velha and Azaruja's culture in order to raise awareness of the richness of the environment where they live, to gain the respect and mutual learning between the two generations concerned, to awaken the younger generations to the understanding of creativity as a means of knowledge and particularly about the traditions of salt, fishing and cork that had structured Portuguese society in its human, geographical, economic, biophysical, political, historical, cultural, social and ecological dimensions.

In addition to the interviews with the local people and their life stories as recounted by them, some collective sessions were also structured, in the context of Creative Practices around Cork Production project in which older people told their labour and work stories to the young people of Azaruja and obtain the feedback of children, crucial for the reciprocal understanding of

**Figure 1** Workshop of assemblage, Azaruja, 2016.



both and a powerful way of generating intergenerational equity and solidarity. The development of these projects, taking into account the different people who live in Castro Marim, Cacela Velha and Azaruja, as well as the importance of their daily lives and their involvement in the artistic process, results from a respect for the places as a plurality of identities. The users of a given place produce the diverse identities of it. The philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) defends that this production results from the different meanings attributed to a place by its inhabitants and from their own experiences in that place.

This idea of space has affinities with the notion of place I used in my work. Thus, the relationship established between each of the inhabitants and the local natural resources through their labour was used as the raw material employed by the researchers.

The artistic practices developed within the scope of the projects presented here are part of the sustainability paradigm that includes the social and cultural pillars, which give voice to people through their participation in projects by narrating their life histories, identifying labor activities that are related to local natural resources and seeking to understand the needs of the inhabitants. This process contributed to greater awareness of local values, the development of developing skills and actively contributing to the evolution of their culture, taking into account the intergenerational dimension as a cultural richness.

## **Cultural Sustainability:**

### **The Social Development and Transformation of a Community Promoted by Creative Collaboration**

“Sustainability is fundamentally about adapting to a new ethic of living on the planet and creating a more equitable and just society through the fair distribution of social goods and resources. Sustainable development questions consumption-based lifestyles and decision-making processes that are based solely upon economic efficiency, but its ethical underpinnings go beyond obligation to the environment and the economy—it is a holistic and creative process towards which we must constantly strive. This is complicated by the fact that sustainable development is based on society’s always changing worldviews and values” (Duxbury, et al. 2007).

This model integrates three dimensions, namely social equity, environmental liability and economic health. However, considering culture as the bedrock of society, some theorists consider it as the fourth pillar of sustainability as important as the other dimensions. Culture is understood as a way of production and dissemination of “identities, meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, desires, memories, purposes, attitudes and understanding” as well as a way of living in society: customs, faiths and conventions; codes of manners, dress, cuisine, language, arts, science, technology, religion and rituals; norms and regulations of behaviour, traditions and institutions.” In this sense, culture is simultaneously, the vehicle and the message that integrates the values and means of social expression (Hawekes 2004).

Cultural sustainability is understood as a change that respects and understands cultural values in their relation to place, community and its geographical context, preserving and revitalizing actively the environment and local culture through their residents with the aim of improving their well-being (Duxbury, et al. 2007).

In the domain of sustainability culture is frequently understood as cultural capital, that includes heritage and arts but also social history, different traditions, place and ethical values. The existing cultural capital, material and immaterial, is our inheritance left by past generations which we will leave to future generations, which in turn will contribute to a better quality of life, a greater knowledge of ourselves and to unite people (Duxbury, et al. 2007).

Understanding culture as the production of social values, so that it remains unified, is necessary a foundation of trust, respect and understanding among its citizens, which is built through cultural interaction. In this context, cultural capital is the aggregating component of a society and social capital is the component that enables its action (Hawkes 2004), through shared rules and information that promote collective action as well as the relation with community and persons (Duxbury, et al. 2007).

The main objectives of a community development are related to the capacity of its inhabitants to intervene and be responsible within their community, have autonomy, express their values and meet their basic needs. These goals are achieved through education, consensus building, access to information and citizen participation. Equally important is the creation of a sense of place in the community to encourage its residents to make decisions about their resources, environment and future.



Art has a primordial role as a symbolic language of a society, namely through the active involvement of social groups in the realization of artistic projects, opposing an elitist art, with specialized audiences or only serving the economic perspective. Depending on the context, art may also have a utilitarian character (Hawekes 2004).

The arts and culture are crucial tools for the cultural development of a community, since they foster the production of knowledge and contribute to the creation of models of sustainability appropriate to each community. In each one it is important that the relation between the community and their artists is non-hierarchical, giving space to social development and transformation promoted by creative collaboration.

# Gleaning Through Listening and Dialogue

“Cultural sustainability demonstrates that the quality of life and health of a community are directly related to the quality and health of its expression, celebration, dialogue and cultural commitment” (Duxbury, et al., 2007).

I would like to begin this chapter by evoking the etymological meaning of the word “culture”, from Latin cultura, culturae, which means “action of care”, “cultivate” or “cultivating mind and knowledge”. Originally, the word culture was originated from another latin term: colere, which means “cultivating plants” or “act of planting and developing agricultural activities”. Therefore, a verb related to agriculture which implies the act of caring, revolving and changing the soil so that it becomes generative (capable of producing or creating).

As time goes by, an analogy was made between care in construction and treatment of planting, with the development of the intellectual and educational capacities. In this sense, culture became connoted with artistic and/or technical manifestations. The diversity of meanings that “culture” had received contributed to its extremely broad and plural character.

I also would like to point out enlighten the meaning of the term gleaning which I use to designate the way of acting, interacting and gathering knowledge from people and from the places where they live. Gleaning is, therefore, a way of knowledge and of producing knowledge. As a verb, the word “glean” means, for instance, to learn, discover, or find out, usually little by little. It also means to collect or gather anything little by little or slowly or to gather what is left or to gather (the usual remnants of a crop) from the field after harvesting.

The origin of the word glean dates from the early 14c. (1350-1400), from Old French glener (Modern French glaner) “to glean”, from Late Latin glennare “make a collection”. Its figurative meaning appeared sense was earlier in English than the literal one of “gather grain left by the reapers” (late 14c.). So, the art practices presented here are an action of discovering, collecting, learning, caring and cultivating local knowledge, little by little, in order to expand and produce it.

Greatly anchored on experience as a source of knowledge and on the interaction with place and its residents, the projects demanded relations of proximity and intimacy with the local population. For this reason, the research adopted, during the whole process, the methodologies of fieldwork and interactive design, implying temporary residence. The empathetic approach embraced as a methodology of interaction and participatory/co-design was conducted by an aesthetic paradigm of dialogue and listening to the local people, trying to understand them (Reaes Pinto, 2015), where non-hierarchical knowledge, based on the sharing of the individual experience of each collaborator in the project was valued. As Nelson and Stolterman says (2012) “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 aptitude to listen and the resulting relational character of the projects had the objective of promoting the wellbeing of local people and their relation with the environment, that is to promote sustainability in its four pillars. From this perspective, according to the notion of enlightened listening created by philosopher David Levin (1989), people were encouraged to share mutual knowledge.



Also important was the holistic view of physicist David Bohm, trying to find a way to increase the quality of life of human beings, either in terms of their inter-relations and in terms of their connections with the environment, as he understands the world as a whole, in which all elements are inter-related in a dynamic process. In this sense, dialogue is used to learn to listen to the other, by enjoying the relationship between people and helping to solve social problems (Bohm, 1989). Thus, the projects were developed with small groups of local population - groups of children and teenagers, of children and local craftsmen and of children and old people in the process of knowing and doing, according to the participatory and collaborative design methodology. These encounters, characterized by an intergenerational nature, contribute to new constructive relations among them (Bohm, 1989).

Trying to get knowledge from the salt, fishing and cork processes, and also from the people who work in them, direct and participatory observations were made of salt extraction from salt marshes in Castro Marim by talking to the salt farmers, of fishing and harvesting activities in Cacela Velha, by talking to retired fishermen and women, and of cork extraction from trees in the hills surrounding Azaruja by interacting with the workers about their labour tasks. Encounters were also held with other local people in their work places homes and in the street. Conversations with inhabitants, especially retired fishermen, women and cork workers, had a special significance (Fig. 1).

**Figure 2** Mutual listening between the artists/designers and the participants, Azaruja, (Reaes Pinto, 2015).



If perceived as a dynamic of interconnections, art must develop according to the environment, that is, it must materialize with the active participation of the observer, resulting in a dilution of the boundaries between the public and the art. The interaction, by allowing the merger between observed and observer, contradicts the aesthetic autonomy of art. (GABLIK, 1992).

Listening and dialoguing was also embedded with the concept of connected knowledge, in which knowledge is built on the practice of conversation, in which one of the participants involved in the dialogue seeks, by means of an empathetic approach, learn from the wisdom of others (Belenky; Clichy; Goldberger; Tarule, 1986). People who share connected knowledge learn through empathy. This is also related with idea of the Philosophy of Listening, by the philosopher Gemma Fiumara (1995), that defends the importance of listening which encourage the equality of different cultures and knowledge (Fiumara, 1995).

An art based on the paradigm of listening to the Other with empathy has yet another consequence - it makes it more socially active. In the words of Nicolas Bourriaud (1997) relational aesthetics is "an art whose theoretical horizon is the domain of human interactions and their social context, rather than the framework of an independent and private symbolic space." The practices developed in the three projects presented here allow all the actors involved to learn, discover, or find out, usually little by little, by caring, revolving and changing the soil so that it becomes generative.





**Figure 3** Baracha, Castro Marim (Reaes Pinto, 2003).



**Figure 4** Art exhibition in Cacela Velha (Reaes Pinto, 2009).



**Figure 5** Art Exhibition/Encounter in Azaruja (Reaes Pinto, Gorgel Pinto, 20017).

## Conclusion

The projects valued labour as a component of community structuring, as well as through its interaction with local natural resources and the environment. In all places where the artistic projects were carried out salt, fish, bivalves and cork are the raw materials that define people and place in a human, geographical, economic, biophysical, political, historical, cultural, socially, economical way that should be promoted in order to develop local sustainability. These places were valued from the social structure suggested by local raw materials and the labour activity that exploits them, through actions concerning salt, fish, bivalves and cork, to promote local culture and local people's creativity. The symbolic dimension of the artistic projects sought to honour the inhabitants of Castro Marim, Cacela Velha and Azaruja who were involved with the materials referred to and to demonstrate the value of their work in a dignified form and, at the same time, actively seek to make our society aware of the importance of places of this kind.

Concerning the Azaruja project there will be an exhibition/ encounter with the participants involved, where images of the whole process will be shown. Other local people will also be invited to collaborate in a new creative workshop with the aim of contributing to the production of utilitarian and symbolic objects of local workmanship.

This kind of practice reconnects the local population to its labour activities through artists and community interaction in the domain of participatory, collaborative and social design, using a comprehensive understanding of life experiences with the local population. (citar-me)

Artistic collaborative projects are characterized by an open practice, built upon interdependent relationships between all actors involved in the project. The participation of local people in all the projects, along with the valorization of their life experiences, enhanced their inclusion in the community and promoted their self-esteem. Listening and talking to the Other, allowing their perspective to resonate through the art work in a dignified form, means replacing the subjectivity of the artist, typical of conventional modern art, by the intersubjectivity inherent in the interaction between artist and local participant.

The materials and its related labour practices from which the projects were developed are considered as a paradigm of sustainable culture as far as they have economic value and can develop communities in social and cultural terms.

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