

# Design Practices within Contemporary Societies

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses pedagogical practices and projects developed in a university context, in partnership with social institutions, aimed at highlighting the importance of social design as a fundamental field of application of Design. These practices are anchored on three axes: (i) the need to integrate students in the professional activity, through real projects; (ii) the inexistence of curricular units structured in Social Design in current programs of Design BAs in Portugal; (iii) the difficulty of social institutions to harness the potential of Design tools and methodologies to respond to their needs. The methodology of this study includes field research on local social issues (direct observation, interviews, visual analysis). The outputs show the importance of design in creating solutions for social needs. Moreover, they demonstrate that integrating social projects in academic contexts contributes significantly to the education of socially aware designers.

**Keywords:** Citizenship design projects, Local networks in design, Pedagogical practices, Social design, Social innovation

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2018, a set of pedagogical practices have been developed within the Design Lab course of the Communication Design BA at Lusófona University in Porto, Portugal, aimed at highlighting the importance of social design innovation as a fundamental field of application of Design hence promoting a socially aware design practice towards human needs and global sustainability. These practices are based on collaborations made with local social institutions and are anchored on three axes: (i) the need to integrate students in the professional activity, through the development of specific projects for real contexts; (ii) the inexistence of curricular units structured in the scope of Social Design in the curricular programs of Design BAs in Portugal; (iii) the difficulty of social institutions to harness the potential of Design tools and methodologies to respond to the needs of both the institution and the community it serves, due to the lack of human and financial resources.

The institutions with whom partnerships were made were: Portuguese Red Cross, through the Delegations of Matosinhos and Vila Nova de Gaia; Eu Sou Eu - Association for the Social Inclusion of Children and Young People, an institution that aims at the inclusion of children with trisomy 21 and other

disabilities, as well as children and young people who are experiencing problems; and Alzheimer Portugal Association, more specifically the Memória de Mim Day Care Centre, managed by the North Delegation of this Association.

In the last decades, several authors and designers have highlighted the importance of the Design discipline for solutions oriented towards the planet's sustainability and towards specific social needs arising from situations such as precariousness, population ageing, social inequalities, disability, among others. Research in this field has been growing and tends to share a common principle: the need to integrate the Designer in multidisciplinary teams. Partnerships with social institutions are often suggested for the identification of society's needs and the creation of appropriate solutions.

In the second half of the 19th century, William Morris (2003) strongly criticized industrialization in his manifestos, claiming that although the capitalist strategy adopted had lowered the cost of products, it had compromised their quality and aesthetic value. Moreover, it had made human beings slaves to machines and transformed cities into places unsuitable for living given the increased pollution. Although his theories and vision of the future suggested the recovery of craft production and rural practices of past eras, these theories expressed a clear concern with social and environmental problems caused by prevailing industrial policies and practices, advocating a Design approach more oriented towards human needs as opposed to that oriented towards the needs of a capitalist market.

In the 20th century, Victor Papanek (1995) criticized the capitalist economy and the excessive production of trivial instruments with an environmental impact that he considered catastrophic, compromising biodiversity and the sustainability of the planet. In his writings, he draws a dramatic portrait of the development of cities, many of which characterized by excessive pollution, and situations of human precariousness and inequality, attributing to the Designer an essential role as an agent of change.

And Margolin (2014) proposed the practice of a Social Design, different from the Design practice within the market context. This differentiation was based on the assumption that the discipline of Design emerged in a market context which does not contemplate the whole spectrum of social needs, since many of these needs are related to individuals who are not part of the consumer public — such as low-income individuals or individuals with special needs arising from age, health problems or disability — and therefore do not generate profit for companies. Hence, he defined Social Design as “that exercised in favor of the satisfaction of human needs”.

Margolin and Margolin (2002) highlighted the need for Designers to develop skills in Social Design with Margolin (2014) advocating the importance of integrating this area in the curricula, considering that Design educators could assume a fundamental role as collective agents of change. He believed that a work with students that highlights the characteristics of a good society, seeking solutions for social change while learning to project and design, could lead to a very positive confluence between methodology and values.

It is under these premises that since 2018 projects have been developed with students from the 3rd year of the Communication Design BA that aim

to satisfy specific needs of society. These are projects carried out in the context of the Design Lab in the first semester of the school year and are intended to:

- Highlight the importance of social innovation as a fundamental field of application for the area of design.
- Promote a socially aware design practice towards planetary sustainability and the response to human needs.
- Identify ways in which Communication Design can contribute to meet specific human needs through projects for real contexts.
- Educate attentive, participatory, and responsible designers regarding the planet's sustainability and human needs.
- Explore and articulate methodologies and tools of Communication Design for social issues.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study includes field research on local social issues. Every year, a social institution is contacted, and a field study is carried out to analyze existing problems and possible forms of Design intervention. The coordinators of each institution or area to be worked on are interviewed and the institution facilities are visited. Previously developed design works (if any) are analyzed, and a briefing is outlined to be worked on with the students.

For the development of the projects, Design Thinking methods (Ambrose & Harris, 2010; Lupton, 2011) are used as the basis of a work process structured into three essential phases: (i) problem definition; (ii) project ideation; (iii) project materialization and implementation.

At the beginning of the school year, an institution is presented to students by one of its representatives, as well as a work proposal. Possible approaches to the project are also discussed in a first session.

The next sessions are dedicated to problem definition which include research and data collection on the client, the project, and the target audience, interviews with the institution collaborators and the community it serves, and visits to the institution itself. Due to Covid constraints it was not possible to do this visit in the last project for Memória de Mim Day Care Centre. Instead, a periodical contact with the Director of the Centre was done as well as a presentation by the researcher Rita Maldonado Branco who is specialized in design for people with dementia.

Based on the outcomes of this phase, a “project briefing is drawn, clearly identifying the problem for the achievement of solutions adjusted and oriented towards the needs of both the institution and the community” (Lima, 2021). Students also decide in this stage whether they want to develop the project individually or in groups.

Following this, we proceed to the ideation phase where ideas are discussed and tested, originality, accessibility and usability are evaluated, financial and material feasibility is assessed, as well as the suitability of the project under development regarding the defined problem. During this process, three interim presentations are planned in class, aimed at the analysis, reflection, and discussion of the results obtained at different stages of the work.

Once the ideation phase is concluded, the project is materialized (either printed, animated, programmed, or produced) and presented to the client in person. This presentation is complemented with a project file with a brief description of the concept, the project methodology, images of materials made and possible future developments. In the following weeks, one or more proposals are selected and implemented by the client. A professional relationship between student and client is thus materialized, often continuing beyond the academic activity.

Following the academic project, an analysis is made, together with the bodies of the social institution: the process, the outputs and possible future developments. This is fundamental for both the institution (how to continue the work developed) and teaching practices (identification of successful aspects and weaknesses, to improve practices in the following year).

## **PROJECTS DEVELOPED**

For four years several projects have been developed in partnership with three social institutions: Portuguese Red Cross (through the Delegations of Matosinhos and Vila Nova de Gaia), Eu Sou Eu - Association for the Social Inclusion of Children and Young People, and Alzheimer Portugal Association (with a project carried out for the Memória de Mim Day Centre).

For the Portuguese Red Cross — Delegation of Matosinhos, students developed a campaign to raise volunteers integrating graphic, audiovisual and digital media materials. This campaign included approaches focused on the overall institution (therefore targeting mass audiences), and others focused on specific services such as support for the elderly, emergency services, collection of goods in supermarkets.

For the Portuguese Red Cross — Delegation of Vila Nova de Gaia students developed a volunteering campaign aimed at recruiting members “for 1€ per month” and to collect contributions for the sustainability of the institution, targeting mass audiences. They also developed campaigns to attract volunteers and to raise funds for the repair/restoration of the Crestuma Children Centre (managed by this Delegation).

This Centre, despite being fully operational, had areas that were visibly deteriorated (such as the playgrounds) or poorly maintained (such as the gardens), requiring not only funding for works but also human labor (for example for gardening services). In this sense, communication materials were designed according to the different needs of the institution and, therefore, aimed at different audiences.

These projects for both Delegations of the Red Cross were based on the premise of the absence of funding for production, which required the students to study strategies and develop communication campaigns at zero cost or, alternatively, to study possible ways of funding (such as partnerships with printing companies and with City Councils, or patronage). Most students chose to use the institution’s web platforms (website and social media), taking advantage of their potential to boost campaigns through multimedia animations and the creation of seasonal posts — in this case, creating templates for monthly posts and others specific to festive seasons, important dates in

the country or for the institution. Having web platforms as the main means of communication, some students also developed printed media, estimating the production costs, and proposing possible ways of funding, as mentioned above.

For the Delegation of Vila Nova de Gaia, students also developed an editorial project to be printed. In this specific case there was financing for production. This delegation had conducted a Mental Health Screening within the community aimed at providing access to a customized mental health service for individuals who had experienced traumatic events. The students were asked to develop a printed publication with the results of this Screening, a project that involved a multidisciplinary team. This was a rather complex assignment that involved knowledge in several areas of graphic design including editorial design, the development of pictograms for the psychological areas covered in the Screening and the creation of several infographics with the data obtained in the study. Given the size of the project and the short time in class to develop it, it was decided to design a set of sample pages — chapter openings, text-only pages, pages with infographics —, as well as the pictograms, and the cover and back cover of the publication. Only the work selected by the Delegation was later finished and printed, with the student/author working directly with the client.

For Eu Sou Eu students developed several projects including: graphic design of the logo (since their logo had legibility problems) and stationary, visual identity of the website and social networks, flyers and posters to promote the institution and its activities, a volunteering campaign, and merchandising (foreseeing forms of self-sustainability). Since Eu Sou Eu hosts a set of parallel projects oriented either to these groups of children and young people or to the senior community, it was also proposed to students to develop the visual identity and promotional materials for these projects, namely: *Inclusão com Arte* (Inclusion with art), a project that proposes to take art workshops to schools and parish councils; *Pinceladas de Autoestima* (Brushstrokes of self-esteem), which proposes the introduction of painting techniques to a senior public; and *Pizzaria 21*, a pizzeria that employs only individuals with trisomy 21 aiming at the integration of these individuals in the professional activity.

For *Inclusão com Arte* and *Pinceladas de Autoestima* students developed logos, stationary, templates for posters promoting their activities and templates for social media publications (in Facebook and Instagram). For *Pizzaria 21* there was already a logo designed so students developed materials such as promotional flyers that included the pizzeria's menu, cardboard boxes for pizzas since they wanted to invest in the takeaway service, materials for the restaurant area such as paper placemats and napkins, and visual identity and templates for social media publications (Facebook and Instagram).

These projects combined various online and offline media, with web content management (once produced by the students) and materials production being the responsibility of Eu Sou Eu. Since there were several projects to be developed for different Eu Sou Eu initiatives, each student (or group of students) chose only 2 to develop.

Projects for the Red Cross and for Eu Sou Eu were targeted at the needs of the institution, so much of the research and work carried out was focused on the institution, its mission, its way of working and its role in the community. The project for the Alzheimer Portugal Association was very different since it was mainly targeted at the users of the Memória de Mim Day Care Centre — individuals with dementia at an early stage. Two proposals were made, within which each student (or group) defined a project to develop: the study of signage for the Day Care Centre and cognitive stimulus materials. This resulted in a set of very different projects, all of them useful for the institution.

For signage, a group of students worked on the lockers identification by combining images familiar to the users (related to their profession, football club, place where they live, etc.), which simultaneously act as cognitive stimuli — users themselves had to choose which images best define/identify them. Other students worked on the identification of different areas of the Centre and routes between these areas. And others developed decorative frames for common areas with rotating illustrations referring, for example, to the current season or festive seasons, thus acting as memory stimuli.

For cognitive stimulus materials, there were several and diverse objects made, including: a Goose Game with questions about lived experiences, popular sayings to be completed by the players and suggestions of songs to sing, aiming at moments of stimulation and sharing of memories and the confraternization between peers; a Bingo game composed of images alluding to Portuguese popular culture with its cards also allowing the memory game activity; a coloring book with illustrations of places where the Centre's users live and with an area for them to write memories from there, a book complemented by audio tracks of the places themselves in order to provide more immersive and memory stimulating moments; and a puzzle with iconic places of Porto. The focus on Portuguese culture was due to the fact that much of the existing cognitive stimulation materials for individuals with dementia in Portugal are foreign and therefore based on the culture of the country of origin. This issue was addressed to the students at the briefing, so they all had the concern to work aspects of Portuguese culture in the materials produced.

## **DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

In the projects carried out for the Red Cross, the Eu Sou Eu and the Alzheimer Portugal Association, students showed a huge enthusiasm and dedication, and a sense of commitment was evident because of the existence of a real client and a cause that made sense to them and appeared to be of great importance.

In the case of the projects carried out for the Red Cross students developed proposals for a common brief, with only one or two proposals being selected. On the one hand, this aspect sharpened the students' competitiveness resulting in greater commitment to finding appropriate solutions. On the other hand, there were students that ended up revealing less concern with the outcomes since the solution did not depend exclusively on them, so their goal was to succeed in the course but not necessarily to see their project selected.

In the case of *Eu Sou Eu*, there was greater diversity of projects to be developed, as the institution had several initiatives to be graphically worked on. Thus, it was established in advance that 4 projects from different students or groups could be selected (the *Eu Sou Eu* visual identity project, the *Inclusão com Arte* project, the *Pinceladas de Autoestima* project and the *Pizzaria 21* project). This was reflected in a greater commitment since the possibility for a student or group to see their work implemented has increased. Still, there were less developed projects both in qualitative terms and in the diversity of materials to be presented.

On the contrary, in the project for Alzheimer Portugal Association, all students, with no exception, showed a huge interest and sense of commitment to the project. Several aspects contributed to this increase in motivation and engagement: the fact that students could explore several types of solutions and create different materials working on those they most identify with or that best fit their preferences as designers; the fact that all the projects could be selected and used by the users of the *Memória de Mim* Day Care Centre; and the collaboration of the Centre's head and the designer and researcher Rita Maldonado Branco, who provided valuable insights for the evolution of the project while contributing to increase the sense of responsibility of the students. Furthermore, the fact that these projects with real clients — social institutions — are repeated annually, with students each year having examples of work from previous years, may have also contributed to this increase in motivation.

## CONCLUSION

These projects for and in partnership with social institutions provided students with an experience of working as designers in a real professional context while highlighting the importance of the designer's role as a social agent. Students were confronted with real social problems found in the community (situations of poverty, domestic violence, special educational needs, dementia), and the needs of the institutions themselves, and challenged to create solutions in the field of communication design based on a set of premises: response to identified social needs; usability and longevity of the projects; graphic and financial viability of the proposals.

Although there was a huge commitment and involvement of the students in all the projects, their motivation increased substantially when they were faced with the possibility of having all the projects used by the institution (instead of knowing in advance that a limited number would be selected). This resulted in higher quality outputs and a greater diversity of proposals.

To conclude, it became clear that at the end of each project the knowledge acquired went beyond the realm of academic exercises in communication design, extending to social learning and humanitarian values and contributing to the education of socially aware designers through design projects aimed at citizenship.

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