

A WORD, A BOOK AND A SHELTER: WEAVING BETTER FUTURES WITH DESIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract

The last few years have been challenging and even paralyzing for young design students: in addition to facing a pandemic, they are now witnessing wars and an acute climate crisis. Working with the physicality of matter and crafts, as well as learning to think with Nature, may be a way to escape ideas of catastrophe (Castro, 2020) and to unblock creativity in order to imagine other futures.

This paper aims to reflect on a trilogy of pedagogical experiences developed with Communication Design BA students from Lusofona University, in collaboration with the artisan Manuel Ferreira, having the plant fiber bulrush [*Schoenoplectus lacustris*] and related crafts as a central motto.

It was concluded that these pedagogical actions, which involved crafts and the plant world, not only promoted mental health among students (namely through an embodied artistic experience) but also brought greater visibility to bulrush handicrafts, contributing to their livelihood and revitalization.

Keywords: *Bulrush, Crafts, Ecology, Sustainable Pedagogies on Art and Design, Collaborative Practises*

Introduction

The art and design community has shown a growing interest in plant fibers and related crafts in recent years. This February, Dior's Autumn/ Winter 24-25 show displayed wearable armor-like sculptures made with a cane by the Indian artist Shakuntala Kulkarni. Another example is *Further On... to Land* (2018), a collaborative art project on bread consisting of a five-day walk of masked bodies that expressively carry wheat from Oslo to a farm.

In Portugal, the studio *Macheia*, founded by product designer Lucrezia Papillo and architect Iany Gayo, explores natural fibers and ancient crafting techniques, such as bulrush and wicker, in collaboration with artisans. Other dialogues between designers/ artists and artisans are currently on display in the exhibition *Um Cento de Cestos* (Popular Art Museum, Lisbon), alongside ethnographic and historical documentation. The exhibition maps a wide range of plant fibers and related crafts (mostly basketry) in Portugal and was curated by Astrid Suzano and Fatima Durkee from the research collective *Passa ao Futuro*.

This interest in nature and local crafts—very likely resulting from climate crisis/ environmental awareness and the deprivation of the physicality of matter intensely felt during COVID—suggests a paradigm shift in design practices, research, and education towards more ecological, situated, and embodied frames.

However, there is still much to be done to achieve a real change since many students are immersed in virtuality/ social media while considerably detached from the physicality of making “real” objects and from their local realities – including nature itself (perhaps a protection against the anxiety of an imminent hecatomb). Also, despite the mentioned collaborative projects between academia and crafts and the current valuing of the unicity of crafted objects (visible in the

collections of multinational brands of house supplies and decoration), several crafts are disappearing as the last professionals are aging.

For the above, we find it most relevant and urgent to propose sustainable pedagogical practices that dignify and disseminate crafts and promote well-being among students while increasing their attention to the natural world. Challenging students to (re)connect with nature through projects that involve understanding forms of inter-species coexistence invites us to think *with* nature (as opposed to thinking *about* nature), defying catastrophic scenarios and imagining better futures (Castro, 2021).

In collaboration with the artisan Manuel Ferreira, the authors organized three workshops for Communication Design BA students, using bulrush and an ancient weaving technique as the basis for action and reflection. The workshops were part of a series of events, *Other Delli Week* at Lusofona University. They had the participation of geologist Anabela Cruces - BioRG, Lusofona University, a specialist in the ecosystem of Paul do Manique do Intendente (the site of the bulrush used), and ornithologist Maria Dias - cE3c, Lisbon University, convoked for the third workshop.

This paper describes and reflects on these three pedagogical actions. Even though these actions are not part of the fashion universe, they can help us think about collaborative production methods that rely on craftsmanship, including weaving with sustainable materials. Our approach allows for an understanding of ecology, which encompasses the study of nature and focuses on the complex interactions between living beings and humans in the environment (Steinmeyer et al., 2021).

Weaving Against Catastrophe

1. Bulrush and the artisan Manuel Ferreira

Bulrush [*Schoenoplectus lacustris*] is a native plant, widespread in the center and north of Portugal's wetlands, swamps, and marshes. It covers large areas over the water and its extraction, as long as it is a controlled and extensive practice (as opposed to intensive and unsustainable), and does not disturb the ecosystem. Bulrush has particular characteristics, with enormous potential for constructing design, artistic, and architectural objects. On the one hand, it is flexible or transmutable when the fibers are juxtaposed; on the other hand, it is resistant and waterproof, lending itself to construction. In Portugal, it is traditionally used to make utilitarian objects and furniture, such as sleeping mats, which migrant farm laborers formerly used due to their light weight and portability.

In this trilogy of workshops, we worked with Bulrush, which was collected in the margins of the Paul de Manique do Intendente, 50 km from Lisbon.¹ The plant is usually harvested in July and August when it is also dried – forming gigantic fans on the ground that evoke land art (fig.1). During 30 years, this job was mainly held by Mr. Joaquim Torres (fig. 2) and his wife, Amélia Torres. Nowadays, Joaquim's brother Francisco Torres and Joaquim Ferreira take care of this themselves.

It's essential to emphasize collecting lakeshore bulrush as a sustainable practice. It is carried out without disrespecting the preservation of the swamp's ecological system (Paul), ensuring future harvests for the local community. Thus, it meets the famous definition of sustainability as 'the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (UN, 1987).



Fig. 1 Bulrush drying, Paul do Manique do Intendente. Image by the authors, July 2021

Manuel Ferreira has been building utilitarian objects and furniture using bulrush for several decades. Today, he is one of the few *bunheiros* (artisans using bulrush, or *bunho*, in Portuguese) in Portugal. His workshop is located in a former cavalry headquarters in Santarém, where he has plenty of space to store the raw materials and develop his production, which is exported to several countries worldwide. However, he has shared his concern over the extinction of this craft since he is aging and realizing that there is a shortage of people willing to learn how to work finely with bulrush.

Manuel Ferreira is as communicative as he is committed to generously sharing his knowledge. Thus, he frequently participates in workshops and projects that bridge crafts and contemporary designers/ artists.

1 The authors' contact with bulrush originated in the project *PaulNatura - Conhecer para Proteger*, led by Anabela Cruces (Lusofona University). This project was mainly supported by the Environmental Fund and had as main objectives to promote the preservation of the natural heritage of Paul do Manique do Intendente (which houses about 180 species) namely through environmental education initiatives. Since 2020, students from Alto de Azambuja Schools Group have been involved in several actions related with the protection of the biodiversity of the Paul. The project also had as partners the Azambuja Town Council, the Manique do Intendente Union of Town Councils and Vila Nova de São Pedro e Maçussa.



Fig. 2 Joaquim Torres assembling the bulrush into bundles. Image by the authors, July 2021

2. Other Delli Weeks

Delli, an informal Design Department at Lusofona University in Lisbon, offers a speculative and experimental-driven BA course in Communication Design. Students are encouraged to question design and the world, which entails a great deal of debate but also exposure to diversity in terms of thematic fields, ways of thinking/ doing, and methodologies.

In this process, *Other Delli Week (ODW)*, an event of talks and workshops that occurs on the campus four times during the academic year, plays a central part. During these four moments, classes give place to challenges proposed by internal or external practitioners, researchers, and all kinds of specialists/ professionals in some area or theme.

The workshops included in this article integrated a trilogy of ODW events with Nature as the main theme: *Other Delli Week 4: Unnatural* (6-10 Dec. 2021), *Other Delli Week 5: Work (and) Environment* (14-18 Mar. 2022), and *Other Delli Week 6: Languages of the Earth* (16-20 May 2022).

3. The Workshops

3.1) Nature is a Book

This first workshop was part of *Other Delli Week 4: Unnatural* (6-10 Dec. 2021), an event focusing on natural and artificial relations. BA Communication Design students investigated the entanglements between nature, artificial objects, consumption, and technology in a series of talks and workshops, reflecting on alternative strategies, methods, and thinking. The week started with talks that enlightened the subsequent workshops,² the last of which over the bulrush of Paul do Manique do Intendente by the geologist and environmental activist Anabela Cruces, who has been involved in several campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of preserving the biodiversity and geodiversity of Paul de Manique among the local population, authorities, and decision-makers.

Cruces provided a comprehensive overview of the Paúl that transcended the description of the natural ecosystem to include its relationship with the community of inhabitants and those involved in the work carried out with the bulrush.

It followed the workshop *Nature, a book* by the authors and Manuel Ferreira.

In this 9-hour experience (distributed over two days), 25 second-year BA students learned an ancient bulrush weaving technique from Manuel Ferreira, the one used to create the sleeping mats used by migrant farm workers.

2 The following talks were part of the event: *Introduction: Spoiled by Immediacy* by Francisco Laranjo; *Multispecies Articulations: On Art, Climate, and Memory* by Luiza Prado; *Bubbles, on Bucky Fuller's "Sub-optimization"* by Silvio Lorusso; *Catástrofe e Extinção* by António Cruz Rodrigues and *O Bunho do Paul de Manique - natureza e arte* by Anabela Cruces.

These objects were then illustrated and taken as pages of a large book, placed in nature as a *locus* for sharing thoughts on the connections between nature and human action, vegetal and synthetic.

The session started with the reading and discussion of a few texts by authors on ecology and plant intelligence, such as Emanuele Coccia (2019) and Ailton Krenak (2020), reminding us of the necessity of changing our relationship with the natural world, as also, our priorities and consumer patterns. The importance of crafts and the knowledge that the experience of sensorially allows was approached through the precious thoughts of Anni Albers (1965).

It followed the division of students into groups of 2/3 and Manuel Ferreira's explanation of the weaving technique. The weaving is done on surprisingly rudimentary looms consisting of an archaic structure of wood, strings, and stones (fig. 3). This collective task was successfully (and enthusiastically) completed in due time. Not all the objects were finely made (some were clumsy), but we had about a dozen woven mats in the end.

The students then applied abstract illustrations that were embroidered on the mats freely using wool (fig. 4). Bright colors, such as electric blue and orange, combined with white, were chosen for their strong visual impact.

In the end, the mats were juxtaposed like a gigantic artist's book and placed on *Jardim do Campo Grande* (the garden in front of the campus) for further sharing of ideas, stories, or simply presence.



Fig. 3 Manuel Ferreira helping student Guilherme Dâmaso with the loom. Image by the authors, 2022



Fig. 4 Illustrated mat. Image by the authors, 2022

3.2) *Nature is a Shelter*

The *Nature is a Shelter* workshop was part of *Other Delli Week 5: Work (and) Environment* (14-18 Mar. 2022). This event is intended to provide a space for our BA students to discuss and imagine alternatives to precarious and exploitative working models, promoting awareness about better ways of functioning collectively with ecosystems and more-than-human others. Similarly to the previous event, the week started with a series of talks that fed conceptually part of the subsequent workshops, such as Silvio Lorusso's *The Great Resignation, an Introduction*, focusing on the changes that the pandemic brought to our relations with work.³

The WS *Nature is a Shelter* participants were about 25 third-year BA students, and the artisan Manuel Ferreira was a guest. The event started with a guided tour of the exhibition above *Um Cento de Cestos* at the Popular Art Museum. This experience provided an overview of raw materials, crafts, and agents of production using plant fibers in Portugal and information concerning contemporary art and design projects developed in dialogue with artisans.

The following day, we met at the Campus for the hands-on component of the workshop. Third-year students were proposed to weave bulrush mats to build a collective protective structure: a shelter.

Built from materials found in each place, improvised or following ancestral models, the shelter is also an archetype of the imaginary that evokes the protection of the body

in the face of a hostile environment. From the primitive hut, the first and mythical human construction imitating bird's nests (Vitruvius, 2009: 71; Semper, 2010; Veiga et al., 2020) to the existential hut, a paradigm of absolute deprivation on

which some alternative experiences to life in society were based (Thoreau, 2016; Le Corbusier, 1951), the shelter allows to conceive its opposite: people experiencing homelessness (Oiticica, in Wood et al., 2006). Thinking about the precariousness of structures to protect people experiencing homelessness is thinking about the contingency of the lives of those who do not have a firm roof and are in transit around the world: migrants, refugees, and those displaced by war.

After observing and discussing some images of rural plant-made temporary shelters by the ethnographer and illustrator Fernando Galhano, students were divided into groups of 3, and Manuel Ferreira introduced them to the weaving technique with bulrush.

Working together, the students created several mats that completely covered two simple wooden structures previously built with the help of Manuel Ferreira (fig.5). Each of these structures was large enough to shelter a standing person who could look through tiny openings in the mats without being seen from the outside (fig.6). The two structures were installed in the entrance garden of the Lusófona University campus, where they remained for a week. They thus became a kind of observation post for university life: they allowed those inside to see who entered and left the campus. At the same time, these temporary structures, built to shelter one person at a time, allowed us to reflect on the minimum living conditions, the precariousness, and the invisibility of migrant workers.

3.3) *Nature is a Word*

The last workshop of this trilogy was part of the event *Other Delli Week 6: Languages of the Earth* (16-20 May 2022), which aimed to reflect on the connections between language/ communication and nature. Here, Delli students were challenged

³ The program of *Other Delli Week 5: Work (and) Environment* included the following talks: *The Great Resignation, an Introduction* by Silvio Lorusso; *Tale of designed dreams* by Francisco Laranjo and *Safer: creating inclusive spaces* by Luiza Prado.



Fig. 5 Building the shelter. Image by José Fadolla, 2022

to think *with* more-than-human others (Castro, 2021) and their ways of communicating to imagine happier societies. Issues such as how the micellar network of fungi can help us to improve collaboration among humans (Tsing, 2015) or how lichens may help us to think about gender identities were explored with BA students, with the help of experts. The biologist Ireneia Melo (Natural History Museum- Lisbon University) introduced us to the language of funguses. Maria Dias from the University of Lisbon shed light on the meanings of bird singing, to name a few.⁴

In *Nature is a Word*, the authors proposed precisely an immersion in bird soundscapes. The workshop was 4 hours long and participants were 1st year's BA students (two groups of about 24).



Fig. 6 Peeking out from the shelter. Image by José Fadolla, 2022

One of the sounds we've always known but only paid diffuse attention to is birdsong. These sounds fulfill specific functions, such as seducing for mating or marking territory. According to Andrew Whitehouse (2015), the song is informed by place and conditioned by other species' sounds. Although responsible for disrupting birds' lives (and sounds), we humans are ancestrally linked to their song in a way that is as subtle as it is effective. We are so attached to these sounds that confirm the arrival of spring that the idea of its extinction, that is, the threat of a "silent spring" (Carson, 1962), is a source of anguish.

This workshop intended to pay homage to these sounds while increasing students' attention to birds and the vegetal world by challenging them to craft their interpretations of birdsong with a vegetal fiber—bulrush—once again.

4 The program of *Other Delli Week 6: Languages of the Earth* (16-20 May 2022) included the talks: *The Language of Funguses* by Ireneia Melo (MUHNAC); *A Rotten Concept* by Natalie Woolf (Lusofona University); *What do birds say when they sing?* by Maria Dias (FCUL) and *Seeing Eyes: Evolution and Culture* by David Bota.

The workshop started with a discussion of a few ideas from foundational texts such as *Silent Spring* by biologist Rachel Carson (a precursor of ecology in the USA, warning as early as 1962 about the harmful consequences of certain chemicals on animal life and birds in particular). The thoughts of the anthropologist Andrew Whitehouse (2015) on what listening to birds in the era of the Anthropocene may entail and mean to humans were also discussed. The aforementioned site of Paul do Manique do Intendente was introduced to these students as a reasonably balanced habitat for many birds and bulrush. There was then a conversation around the idea of *onomatopoeia* - pivotal when translating the sound of a bird into a word. Curious facts were mentioned, including the onomatopoeic nature of several bird names and the verbs that designate the sounds they produce.

At Campo Grande Garden, participants were invited to listen to and record bird sounds with their mobile phones. Despite all the noise pollution, they could hear blackbirds, sparrows,

hoopoes, and even some peacocks! At that time, some students seemed pleased, while others were surprised to be asked to do such an unusual task.

Students were then divided into groups and started translating those bird sounds into words. This was quite challenging since those bird sounds don't correspond entirely to vowels and consonants in human language. A great deal of creativity and a few difficult choices were necessary at this phase. In the end, these onomatopoeias were selected for further production.

The following moment involved using bulrush and cotton string to craft the letters of the selected onomatopoeias (fig.7). There was a relaxed atmosphere. At the same time, students bent, twisted, and cut the bulrush fibers to obtain the form of an "W" or an "A"—which we believe is due to a combination of causes: being immersed (paying proper attention) in Nature, working manually with plant fiber, and playing freely with type.



Fig. 7 Students Madalena Brito and Octavio Motta Crafting a "K."
Image by the authors, 2022



Fig. 8 A group of first-year students holding the sound of a peacock.
Image by the authors, 2022

In the end, participants assembled the letters of a few onomatopeias. They held them up (fig.8). The semantic contents of these pieces, as well as their visual and material features (namely, their irregularity) and the joyful presence of students, made this a compelling tribute to the birds of Campo Grande in the era of the Anthropocene.

It should also be noted that the authors have maintained their interest in birds as a subject for educational activities. Thus, Birdsong was the motto for two subsequent workshops: *This is not a Silent Spring*, part of ELIA Academy 2023, Évora, 12th May, and *Piu/ Tweet/ Twip*, part of *Encontro de Tipografia 13: Other Typographic Worlds*, Lusofona University, Lisbon, 22nd Nov. 2023.

Conclusions

Even though the trilogy of workshops was undoubtedly beneficial for students in many ways (increasing their environmental awareness, well-being, visual culture, and artistic competencies), the first two had a more substantial impact on students due to the presence of an artisan who taught a new technique (and a weaving one, in specific). The experience of working with Manuel Ferreira on a rudimentary loom was transformative and even therapeutic. Students who arrived stressed quickly surrendered to weaving with bulrush (as also to the friendliness and calm of the craftsman), commenting on how satisfying it was. The contact with a plant fiber certainly played a part in this atmosphere of relaxation and the sensoriality of the task, including its haptic dimension. It should be noted that this workshop took place soon after the second COVID lockdown, which stresses the importance (or even urgency) for students of handling accurate materials and objects.

The approximation to the natural world, either bulrush or bird-song, namely by increasing

Students' attention towards it was a goal achieved, and we believe it fed students critical thinking on issues such as the climate crisis we are experiencing. Other current matters were addressed and discussed with students through these workshops, such as the harsh working conditions faced by rural workers who move seasonally.

The collective aspect of the tasks—which involved sharing difficulties and achievements—also contributed to this good-humored atmosphere, and it should be added that it constitutes important training for a future designer (who, with very few exceptions, can't go very far in isolation).

Also, we could all sense students' empowerment from seeing their pieces growing as they worked, culminating in a real object. This joy is crucial for students' interest and self-confidence.

The workshops also contributed to the valorization and dissemination of crafts using lakeshore bulrush, an underestimated and little-known material, even in the context of traditional Portuguese basketry, where several other raw materials, such as basket willow, esparto, or palm, are typically favored.

This humble raw material, rarely used beyond sleeping mats or decorative purposes, has nevertheless shown great versatility and suitability for contemporary and sustainable pedagogies.

By manipulating lakeshore bulrush, students of the Communication Design degree could experiment with various processes of collective creation, from learning traditional weaving processes led by an experienced craftsman to free exploration, creating onomatopoeic structures from bird-songs. These processes sought to challenge commonplaces of conventional teaching and propose other approaches,

which value the tactile over the visual, the collaborative over the individual, and the exploratory over the prescriptive.

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