

CO-DESIGN WITH TIMORESE ARTISTS: PRACTICE-LED REFLECTIONS ON DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT IN TIMOR-LESTE

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-led co-design project developed in East Timor with a group of Timorese artists, in 2025 coordinated by European experts in markets and design. Although the project had a twofold approach (design and markets), the current text focuses on the design outcomes of the project. Despite the Portuguese participants' cultural and historical links with East Timor, socio-cultural assumptions were not valid, as the knowledge of the local reality was narrow, the resources were scarce, the communication channels were limited, and there was a language barrier. The reality of East Timor is shaped by historical challenges and an ongoing economic crisis, where more than 41% of the population lives below the poverty line World Bank (2023). Despite this, a striving and highly dynamic community of artists has been shaping the identity of one of the youngest countries in the world. What started as a training and advisory program in brand design and product development ended as a larger and more sustainable project that included the creation of an open-source toolkit and event curation. The project engaged contemporary Timorese artists in a hybrid collaborative design process focused on brand identity and sustainable product development and businesses. The process was highly iterative, and the method combined co-creation design principles (Sanders & Stappers) and the horizontal framework of Mazzarotto's cultural synthesis, based on Paulo Freire, where designers and participants merge their expertise and local/community know-how, aiming at a socially conscious and sustainable outcomes. The project results included a collection of art-based merchandising products, a cultural event and exhibition in Dili, a catalogue, and an open source toolkit specially designed for the art community in East Timor, built from the learning process of the designers and experts. This last outcome was driven by the need for long-term follow-up mechanisms and knowledge transfer, which endangered the societal impact of this initiative. This paper argues that, in such realities, influenced by economic and social inequalities, a co-design approach should propose a more resilient approach that embeds the post-project continuity into the design process itself. By presenting the design journey, the designed products and toolkit and participant feedback, this paper also illustrates how co-design projects in a country with significant developmental challenges, but with a vibrant artistic community, should privilege situated learning, local ownership and equity over predetermined assumptions.

Keywords: *Co-design, East Timor, social sustainability, cultural synthesis, knowledge transfer.*

1. Introduction

This paper presents a project that gathered European designers, a creative market expert and Timorese artists. It started in October 2024 and ran until October 2025 in Dili, Timor-Leste. The main goal was to foster local artists and their creative businesses. Starting as a training and advisory program in brand design and product development, this project evolved towards a co-design program and turned into a larger and more sustainable project that included the creation of an open source toolkit and event curation. The final project engaged a small group of Timorese artists in a hybrid collaborative design process focused on brand identity and sustainable product development and businesses. Considering the twofold topics of work – design and markets – this paper will focus on the development of the co-design program, product development, and final exhibition design.

2. Timor-Leste context and cultural heritage

Timor-Leste is the youngest country in Asia, marked by economic and social struggles, since it gained its independence in 2002. According to the World Bank (2023), more than 41% of Timor-Leste's

population lives below the national poverty line. Despite these challenges, the Timorese people demonstrate remarkable interest in the sectors of art and culture that are growing in activity.

“While formal pathways for artistic education remain limited, community groups continue to nurture emerging talent. Artists and cultural workers in Timor-Leste have largely shaped their practices as livelihoods deeply rooted in rich intangible cultural heritage. This potential must be strategically leveraged to ensure that safeguarding living heritage and cultural industry growth go hand in hand.” (UNESCO, 2026)

Timor-Leste also has one of the youngest populations in Asia, with youth representing more than 70% of its population (UNFPA, 2022). And this reflects in a cultural ecosystem developed by young artists and fueled by the civil society. A community gathered around strong values of national identity and ancestrality, deep relation with nature and resilience. The reality shows that formal education in the arts is scarce, and the main drivers of arts and cultural development are institutions such as Arte Moris. Established in 2003, Arte Moris (which means “Living Art” in Tétum) is a free school that aims to use art and creativity as a means to express a collective and individual identity while simultaneously serving as a tool for healing from the brutal military occupation of the previous decades.

3. The challenges of a co-design program

The Timor-Leste Art Project was initially proposed by the European Union Delegation in Dili, with the support of the Cultural Relations Platform, a EU-funded project that connects artists and *cultural* agents from around the world for dialogue, exchange and cooperation (CRP).

Recognising the need for capacity-building in the fields of innovative product design and entrepreneurial competencies among Timorese artists, these institutions funded a training program aimed at a group of artists to help them develop their careers and businesses, conducted by Designers and a Branding and Market expert.

The initial briefing proposed by the CRP was to translate artworks into merchandise products and build a branding strategy. Products that could meet consumer expectations in creativity, originality, quality and sustainability. The project also aimed to create business strategies and build brands that could access international markets, and the European market in particular. Considering this briefing, our first challenge was to reevaluate the project’s objectives, methodology, and deliverables. As European designers, the risk of trying to “solve” the problem of “others” by applying a supposedly universal method seemed obvious.

Although the designers were Portuguese with historical ties to Timor-Leste, their understanding of the local context was limited due to scarce resources and language barriers. To address this, we connected with a trusted member of the Dili art community who helped us gather a group of ten artists who would take part in this project. The first stage was to understand the reality better and to redefine the objectives of the program. After some online meetings, we slowly started to build a relationship based on trust and mutual understanding that allowed us to redesign the programs’ initial goals. In this context, the project evolved from a European-led standard training program into a co-design program, a locally-driven collaboration work emphasising continuity, ownership, and creative sustainability.

Drawing on Visser et al. (2005), the project reframed artists as “experts on their experience domains”, replacing top-down design with collective authorship. Considering Sanders and Stappers (2008) definition of design process, we also envisioned the training program as a co-design program.

The authors take co-creation to refer to any act of collective creativity, i.e. creativity that is shared by two or more people. (...) co-design is a specific instance of co-creation. Co-design refers, for some people, to the collective creativity of collaborating designers. We use co-design in a broader sense to refer to the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process. (Sanders & Stappers, 2008)

In theoretical terms, the work follows Mazzarotto’s (2024) concept of cultural synthesis, inspired by Paulo Freire’s (2020) dialogic pedagogy and the assumption that “No one educates anyone — no one educates himself — men educate each other, mediated by the world.” (Freire, 2000)

The Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, supported his methodology on a ethical-critical-political-educational perspective (UNESCO, 2017). In response to the cultural invasion — where the invaders impose their own worldview upon the cultural context of the invaded while curbing their creativity — he proposes a cultural synthesis, where the historical leaders and oppressors engage in a dialogical praxis of understanding and collective transformation:

...Instead of following predetermined plans, leaders and people, identifying together, create the guidelines of their action. In this synthesis, leaders and people are somehow reborn in new knowledge and new action [...] Cultural synthesis does not deny the differences between the two views; indeed, it is based on these differences. It does deny the invasion of one by the other, but affirms the undeniable support each gives to the other. (Freire 2000)

Mazzarotto and Serpa (2024) build on Freire's epistemology to reflect about Design as cultural invasion and how this concept of cultural synthesis can occur in today's social structures.

Synthesis is, above all, a critical and transformative dialogue in which both designers and the community become different from what they were before, through the creation of new knowledge and practices that were only made possible by the richness of the different voices and histories involved. It is a complex process that takes time, demands the creation of bonds of solidarity, and requires respect for local culture and mechanisms of dialogue and mediation. (Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022)*

This approach was instrumental in the current project, as we recognized the risks associated with creating or maintaining anti-dialogical actions. These risks included 1) imposing a moral, technical and cultural authority by means of a "One-World World" point of view, instead of understanding "(...) a world where many worlds fit" (Escobar, 2018) and 2) a over "designerly" way of thinking, as Lorusso explains: "To maintain the wealth of preexisting relationships—be they historical, political, or cultural—design should resist the temptation to formalize, to abstract, to be *the* relation." (Lorusso, 2021)

We also understood quickly that the project should have a revised timeframe, that we had to adopt a flexible set of goals, one that could change as the project progressed, and most importantly, we wanted to empower the participants by providing them with tools that they could use in the future.

4. Objectives

Considering the design vector of the program, the project's main goal was to empower Timorese artists to create self-sustaining art-based products along with a strong personal brand. To achieve this objectives, there was a reframing of the project's scope to include a toolkit for ongoing training and business development. With this, we sought to strengthen equity and democratic access to the experience, while creating a lasting impact in the community. As a means to communicate the results of this experience, and opening the project to the community, while reinforcing the sense of authorship, there was also the goal of creating a final exhibition and documentation of the project. As external designers, our main objective was to adopt and implement a participatory methodology grounded in dialogic and horizontal collaboration, evaluating each step through the lens of co-creation.

5. Design journey and outcomes

The project adopted a hybrid and iterative method, grounded in practice-based and participatory methods, informed by Sanders & Stappers (2008) and Mazzarotto (2024) within Freire's (2020) conception of critical dialogue.

The ten participants were mainly young artists though only three of them were women, which reflects the lack of visibility women have in the arts in this community. Among the group was one older participant, a senior artist well-known across various creative fields, including sculpture, music, performance and theatre. This was a pivotal figure around whom everyone gathered with respect. He was also a former guerrilla fighter with a remarkable life experience.

In the first stage, we focused on getting to know the community of artists. This was possible through online webinars, which included input theoretical sessions, practical exercises and more informal conversations. This was mediated by a tetum-portuguese translator and facilitated by the EU delegation in Dili that provided the technological infrastructure and space for the group to meet. This phase was long and challenging to manage due to communication barriers (such as internet connection and language). Regarding the language, although Portuguese is one of the official languages of Timor-Leste, it is not the primary language for this group of artists. This presented a new barrier: the lexicon, and there were, sometimes, concepts and ideas lost in translation, in both directions. Additionally, the designers struggled with understanding the expected pace and level of engagement from the participants. But slowly, mutual trust began to develop as the artists started to take ownership of designing the program path themselves. Through practical exercises that explored their background and own artistic practice and world-view, we developed discussion sessions that allowed the designers to better understand the reality. The main outcome of these first online sessions was the collaborative draft of a working plan for the onsite workshop week in Dili where we could identify the main topics that the artists wanted to research. Regarding the framing of the outcomes, we discussed both possibilities: individual and collective products. As for the main topics they selected "Moris" (Life); "Natureza" (Nature) and "Fantázia" (Fantasy).

Stage two was the face-to-face workshop, from July 21 to 25, 2025, in Dili, where the workshop was led by one designer. The sessions included some pre-recorded lectures from the European Brand and Market expert, but most of the work was around the product design process and visual identity.

* A free translation by the authors using the ChatGPT language model based on the original Portuguese text.

The first exercises implemented were classic creative ice-breakers. The first was a *cadavre-exquis*. Considering the strong relation to Nature and the territory, the prompt was to design a part of an animal, whether real or imaginary. This resulted in three creatures, that the group decided to name. One of the creatures became the metaphor of the project: *Kokoroek*. This is a Tetum onomatopoeia for the sound of a rooster. The rooster is one of the most common animals in the area and relates to the country's name and origin, Loro Sa'e, meaning "rising sun," as it is the animal that sings at the dawn.

The second was a visual mind map. This exercise was decisive for all the participants, artists and designer. Starting from the three keywords they had previously identified (Life, Nature, Fantasy), the artists started to add words and images. They linked projections of their individual worlds and slowly drew a visual conversation. During this process words, illustrations, objects and photographs were added to this collective mural. The senior artist played a key role in creating connections and narratives around the concepts that emerged on the paper. After some discussion, the artists started to identify some possible paths for their practical work, focusing on the development of products. They agreed on a collective approach, named *Kokoroek*, while still allowing for individual expressions.

The following days included input sessions on basic graphic design concepts and digital tools, as the artists were requesting specific resources to leverage their initial concepts. The ideation process was feed with local materials research and field trips. Alongside, there were parallel events related to music and culture, to which the designer was also invited. This allowed for a better and deeper understanding of their creative process and how they could develop their products in a sustainable way.

They quickly started prototyping on day two, experimenting with different techniques, both analogue and digital, as there was a computer available for them to work with. From lino printing to molding, weaving and drawing, they started designing products, inspired by their art and strongly grounded in the territory and heritage. During the workshop week, nine different products emerged, from which eight were further developed in the following months with ongoing supervision from the designers (Figure 1).

Seven of the participants took a questionnaire that allowed us to assess some of the impact of this activity.

Table 1. Workshop evaluation form.

Score 1 to 5	1	2	3	4	5
Overall impression	0	0	0	3	4
Format of the event	0	0	0	5	2
Duration of the event	0	0	1	4	2
Facilitation and moderation	0	0	1	2	4
Presentations/lectures	0	0	0	2	5
Group exercises	0	0	0	1	6
Practical exercises	0	0	0	3	4
Field visits	0	0	0	1	6

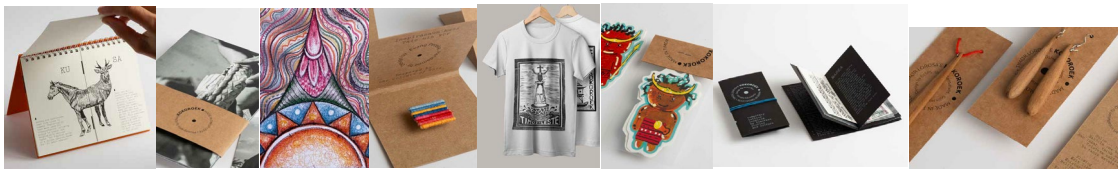
The results were quite encouraging (Table 1), with the vast majority of respondents providing combined scores of 4 and 5. The lowest-rated parameter was the duration of the event; however, it remained positive, with four participants assigning it a score of 4. The evaluation form included some qualitative questions, and some of the comments from participants were as follows: "We learned a lot in five days by working in groups."; "I gained new knowledge that taught me how to share my art with the world."; "All very good! I hope we can continue these kinds of activities in the future so that we can further develop our skills".

After the workshop, it was decided that one of the main contributions of this project could be the open access to all the materials and tools that had been created and delivered since the beginning of the program. This became a toolkit that was later handed-over to the Arte Moris association, as mediators for the Timorese arts community. The toolkit was specifically developed for this community, in both Tétum and English, to help them find ways to strengthen their capacity to present their work both online and offline. The modules included: Identity development; Market opportunities; Promotion and Communication; Product Development.

The final stage of the project included an exhibition of the results of the workshop. This happened at the Jorge Sampaio Cultural Centre, Portuguese Embassy in Dili in October 2025. The "Kokoroek – TIMOR-LESTE ART From Creative Practice to Cultural Product" was a co-curated exhibition that included a music performance by some of the artists, an art installation, framing one of the products, and the display of the final prototypes.

The exhibition had great resonance in the cultural and political ecosystem of Dili, with the participation of many artists from the Dili art community, and H.E. President of Republic of Timor-Leste, Dr. José Ramos Horta, Ministers, Embassadors, along with high-level representatives from civil society.

Figure 1. Products.



6. Conclusions

Timor-Leste has a vibrant artistic community with a huge potential, that is only limited by socio-economic inequality. But this project concluded that a co-design approach may function as a tool to dissolve boundaries, towards a dialogic collaboration that fosters creative resilience and long-term competencies. Ultimately, the *Kororoek* brand emerged from shared authorship, incorporating local heritage, innovative ideas and technical know-how provided during the project. The toolkit documented design processes and business strategies, serving as an educational tool and knowledge repository hosted by *Arte Moris*, ensuring access to all Timorese artists. Participants reported increased capacity to communicate their work professionally and to develop independent artistic practices. Designers acted as facilitators, enabling environments for individual and authentic expression, while teaching and learning at the same time.

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