

Reasons to Research in the Mediterranean Area



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# CONTEMPORARY PANORAMA

PAD Pages on Arts and Design

#14 Reasons to Research in the Mediterranean Area

## The development of Circular Economy materials in the Mediterranean: organic waste as a valuable resource for the economic and social development of the area

Chiara Catgiu, ARUP

## **Keywords**

Mediterranean context, environment, circular economy, eco-design, sustainability, innovative materials, fashion design

## Abstract

The article wants to be a contribution to the understanding of social and environmental issues that the area of the Mediterranean is facing after the global economic crisis and wants to propose the application of the circular economy model, with particular reference to the materials obtained from organic waste, to resolve the environmental and social problems of the region. The circular materials described in the article are produced starting from organic waste and transformed into a valuable resource, by promoting resource efficiency and jobs creation at the same time. The article presents three case studies focused on the reuse of waste materials in innovative applications, by applying the circular economy concept, within the framework of eco-design and resources reutilization. The materials are analyzed according to the circular economy principles and to other relevant parameters.

## 1. Introduction to the context and objectives

The Mediterranean Region boasts unique, rich biodiversity and it has been the birthplace of historically significant societies important for the European civilization (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2016). Nowadays, the Mediterranean area is facing several environmental and social problems, mainly due to climate change and to people unemployment. The economies of Mediterranean countries have been severely affected by the global economic crisis (Bartlett & Prica, 2011), together with the migration of talented people from the Southern European Countries towards more developed ones. To promote the sustainability and social development of the Mediterranean regions, companies need to be supported by high qualified people, with creative minds and technical skills, towards new eco-innovation patterns. However, insecure jobs and decreased salaries force young and talented people to seek more promising job opportunities in other places in Europe. The solution can be found in the circular economy model, as proposed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2016). The circular economy is defined as a regenerative and restorative industrial system where the end-of-life concept is replaced with restoration and with the use of renewable materials and energy. A better design of materials and products can lead to the elimination of waste (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). There are many benefits in moving to a circular economy, from the preservation and valorization of natural resources to the elimination of the concept of waste, from the redesign of products and systems to the development of new materials, into a continuous positive development cycle (Moreno, Rios, Rowe, Charnley, & Rosen, 2016).

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Furthermore, a linear economy that extracts resources at increasing rates, according to the principles of take-makedispose, without consideration of the environment in which it operates, cannot continue indefinitely (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013). The circular model promises a new solution by taking care of the environment that surrounds us and by supporting the creation of jobs (Circle Economy, 2017), thus creating new social opportunities and economic growth as well (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2009).

The paper aims at identifying new emerging circular materials that can potentially be the enablers of the social and economic change, starting from waste and transformed into new valuable resources. The materials will be analyzed according to a methodology that will be explained in the following paragraph.

## 2. Methodology

The circular economy changes completely the perspective of the designer, by addressing new challenges, by redefining the end-of-life concept and by shifting towards the use of more sustainable materials (World Economic Forum, 2018; Arcolab, 2018).

A circular or sustainable material is by definition "something whose production is supported indefinitely by nature, which means, a resource is used up at the same speed that it is renewed and no permanent damage to the environment should occur in the meanwhile" (Metroplan, 2012; Dahlstrom, 2016). The materials proposed in the article were selected according to the eco-design and circular economy principles. At the start of a product's life, both the design and the production process impact on resource use and waste generation (European Commission, 2017). Eco-design puts great emphasis on environmental awareness and, more generally, on the sustainable development (French Packaging Council, 2014). It helps closing material loops and contributes to a more efficient use of resources (Eikelenberg, Kok, & Tempelman, 2003). This can be achieved by designing for product longevity or durability, or by enabling the effective extension of product life through reuse, maintenance and repair, technical upgradability or disassembly so that their components and materials can be reused or recycled (European Commission, 2015). The circular materials were analyzed according to aspects relevant for the application of the Circular Economy model in the Mediterranean area.

The first parameter evaluated was the opportunity to transform a common waste organic material, now a problem for the Mediterranean area, into a valuable opportunity. This can be done thanks to innovative and creative minds, together with technical capabilities.

The second parameter was the renewability of the material at the end-of-life into the same or into other applications. Renewable materials are those materials that can be produced or regenerated at the same speed at which they are used. They can be made from natural or from synthetic products and they often contain a percentage of recycled product (Garvin, 2017). The third analyzed quality was the biodegradability. Biodegradability is the ability of materials to be degraded into simpler organic substances through the action of enzymes from microorganisms (Ecozema, 2015).

The case studies analyzed in the article represent the concretization of some of the innovative materials obtained through the currently exploited design practices in the Mediterranean area.

In particular, the materials presented in the case studies are the starting points that the Mediterranean needs for the sustainable development of the rural areas, with the use of poor and waste materials and local resources, then transformed into new valuable products.

## 3. Case studies

The first case study that this article wants to analyze is Wineleather from Vegea, an Italian company specialized in the search of innovative textile solutions based on bio-based materials, born in 2016 from an idea of the architect Gianpiero Tessitore and of the chemist Francesco Merlino. The company became famous thanks to her award-winning project in the Global change award contest organized by the H&M foundation. Wineleather is a biomaterial obtained from the processing of skins, seeds and stalks of the grapes obtained from the production of wine, in particular from the lignocellulose and the oils (Fig. 1).

The Vegea research has been focused on the creation of innovative biomaterials, compatible with all the applications of the fashion sector, to respond to the more demanding request of green and animal free products. Vegea unites two Italian sectors, typical of all the Mediterranean traditions, fashion and wine. With about 18% of global production Italy is the largest producer of wine in the world, which makes the country the ideal territory for processing Wineleather (Vegea Company, 2017). The first tests of this vegetable leather have been obtained from wine production waste (Fig. 2).



Figure 1. Wineleather material, designed by Vegea company, Italy. Courtesy of Vegea.



Figure 2. Wineleather material, designed by Vegea company, Italy. Courtesy of Vegea.

Wineleather by Vegea, is a material obtained by the marcs discarded from the agro-food industry and processed through a sustainable process that uses the machinery already present in the tanning plants.

After a brief period of fine-tuning of the leather, Vegea has finally launched a first test collection to test the material used to create products such as shoes, bags and clothes (Fig. 3). For the occasion, it relied on the creativity of Tiziano Guardini, one of the most prestigious designers in the world of sustainable fashion (Vegea Company, 2017).

Thanks to this biodegradable material, the wine production scraps are turned into a high added value product, by using a material, the wine production waste, of which the Mediterranean area is rich and the environment is safe.

The second case study this article wants to face is Bagasse, a particular kind of paper produced by the Egyptian company Mintra, specialized in the production of office and school supplies, that has promoted its new eco-friendly range of paper products where the paper is made for 80% from sugarcane waste and 20% certified virgin pulp (Mintra, 2010). The material, called Bagasse (Fig. 4), comes primarily from sugarcane, one of Egypt's biggest cultivations and it will return to the biosphere after disposal. Bagasse, or sugarcane pulp, is the residual material after processing sugarcane. In particular, it comes from the waste fibers left over when sugar is refined for food. Most of the time this residual matter is reluctantly burnt, while it can be used for a much better purpose. By taking care of the residual material, Mintra reduces the emission of CO<sub>2</sub>, since the pulp isn't burnt, while at the same time provides a natural alternative to harmful plastic objects (Mintra, 2010).



Figure 3. Wineleather material, designed by Vegea company, Italy. Courtesy of Vegea.



Figure 4. Bagasse material, designed by Mintra, Egypt. Courtesy of Mintra.

Bagasse looks and costs the same money of the commercially available on the market paper products, but thanks to its use, a lot of trees can be saved and less than 75% of energy and water are needed to produce it. The final product is compostable, recyclable and immediately renewable.

Mintra has understood that by using local resources, the environment and the social community can benefit from it, by giving work to people and by saving trees. This approach keeps the globe moving toward a better environment by slowing down the nasty effect of today's industries and technologies (Mintra, 2010) (Mintra, 2010).



Figure 5. Hilaturas Arnau material, designed by Hilaturas Arnau, Spain. Courtesy of Hilaturas Arnau.

The third case study is Hilaturas Arnau (Fig. 5), a Spanish company involved in the environmental sustainability with a full range of yarns manufactured from 100% recycled materials derived mostly from fish nets, destined to cover the demand that exists for socially and environmentally respon-

sible products. The end-of-life yarns, of which the Mediterranean area is largely polluted, are used by the company for the production of clothes, decorative and technical textiles. The sustainable certification of Hilaturas Arnau is provided by Ecocert Textile, to certify that it has been manufactured in centers of production where the environment and the universal rights of the workers are respected. In the past, the recycling of natural fibers was associated only with the production of low quality fabrics but today things are very different.



Figure 6. Hilaturas Arnau material, designed by Hilaturas Arnau, Spain. Courtesy of Hilaturas Arnau.

It was in 1947, thanks to Francisco Arnau Comas, when Hilaturas Arnau opened its doors for the first time. Hilaturas Arnau was a consolidated business, but today the company is run by the grandson of the founder of the company, who has changed for sustainability, by opting for manufacturing with recycled fibers. Thus, Hilaturas Arnau has been able to adapt to the requirements of the market betting on special and technical yarns for fashion garments and technical yarns for industrial uses, due to its great capacity and resistance, although the recycled material (Fig. 6). Hilaturas Arnau materials are renewable materials and they are a concrete proof that the use of recycled materials is essential also in the production of valuable products, thus leading to cost and energy savings on one hand, and increasing the textiles lifecycle on the other (Hilaturas Arnau, 2014).

## 4. Discussion

According to Jonathan Cullen, the materials science community has a key role to play in defining a future circular materials economy and in establishing sound metrics to measure progress toward circularity. This community will also be kept to balance the excitement that comes from developing new circular materials with a new caution to ensure these materials can be produced on series and be maintained into closed-loop cycles (Cullen, 2018). The case studies faced in the article are a demonstration of how closing material loops is becoming a concrete possibility. The large applications of organic waste materials into new high added value products is something becoming reality, everyday even more.

The first material, Wineleather, obtained from the wine production waste, is a biodegradable material and it is a concrete attempt of transforming something with no value, typical of the Mediterranean area, the wine production waste, into a valuable resource, the wine textile, and then apply it to the fashion industry.

The second case study, the paper Bagasse, is the witness of how the sugarcane waste, one of the biggest cultivations both in Egypt and in the Mediterranean region, can be transformed into a valuable resource, the paper products, and be at the same time a renewable and biodegradable material. Finally, the third case study presents the Hilaturas Arnau material, that helps to clean the Mediterranean basin, by taking the abandoned fish nets and transformed them into precious decorative and technical textiles, is a concrete proof of a renewable material.

The presented materials have still some missing points, such as the dependence of the primary material quantity from the organic waste materials. From a technical point of view, the quality and quantity of secondary raw materials on the market is still a barrier for the circular economy because of the insufficient quality and of the non-existent or too small quantity available after the collection and disposal steps (Blériot, 2017). For example, in the case studies presented, one of the main uncertain points is the variability of the secondary raw materials source at the beginning of the process. Other aspects are the missing renewability, as in the case of Wineleather, or of the biodegradability, as in the case of Hilaturas Arnau. In fact, the transition to the circular materials is still not complete and it will require a coordinated effort and an active involvement of the designers, materials scientists communities and citizens (European Commission, 2017), by supporting the invention of biodegradable and renewable materials and by preventing the production of waste.

Another key aspect that can be considered is the lack of coordination and transparency throughout the value chain, from the design to the recycling process, and the missing implementation of the extended producer responsibility, since it is difficult that the interests of designers, producers, users and recyclers are aligned nowadays (OECD, 2018). Moreover, the current pricing system does not encourage efficient resource reuse and does not reflect the full environmental costs of production and consumption (European Commission, 2015). Choices made by consumers have in fact the potential to either support or hamper the process of developing a circular economy (SWITCHMED, 2015).

## 5. Conclusions and future perspectives

Making the transition to a circular economy involves the overcoming of both creative and technical barriers. Demographic factors, various socio-economic and geographical conditions have lead to disparities between North and South Europe. The disparities could provide an opportunity to cultivate faster Circular Economy practices to South Europe, as a comparative benefit against Northern Countries, as nations with more mature conventional waste treatments.

The transition to Circular Economy needs time, both to cultivate new culture and to develop innovations. A greater attention during the design phase can lead to greener products that consume less energy and resources during manufacture, generate less waste and pollution at their end-of-life stages, incorporate no toxic substances, create new markets for secondary raw materials, and open up to new business opportunities that in turn will create jobs (European Commission, 2017). The future trends are an opportunity for designers to apply circular economy practices in their materials choices. The design for social and environmental sustainability is one of the main solutions to the problems the Mediterranean countries are facing. The discovery and implementation of circular materials can reach a high level of resource efficiency and of job creation, with the contemporary development of new

local and social occasions for the Mediterranean communities. However, the local and old traditions combined with the new techniques and mindsets, coming from the young people, need to be better addressed, also with financing incentives for proposal linked to the development of the territories and communities in the Mediterranean ecosystem. Summarizing, a lack of governance and awareness on the topic is still present among the population and too many complexities and controversies are present among the Mediterranean regions. Information and good practices exchanges can be a proficient solution to the most relevant and urgent issues. Also, the use of financial incentives and a strong change in the definition of regulations, together by creating a network within the circular economy, for the promotion of social and environmental initiatives, will enable designers and communities to effectively make the transition.

The actual state of recycling, repair and reuse in Mediterranean countries gives a good opportunity for population to think that there is further potential to make the transition to a more circular economy, where materials never become waste, while creating social and economic opportunities (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013).

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**STUDIO SIGNO FULVIO BIANCONI** DEGO B ERBERTO CAR EUGENIO MIMMO CAST **GIULIO CON** SALVATORE GREGO EDWARD G GIANCARLO ERANCO) MARGELLO 1 1 AP N 🕩 0 

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These documents (originals as well layouts of projects, books, posters, prints, catalogues, correspondence, photographs) help reconstruct the history of graphic design in Italy and support research and educational activities, as it is the CDGP's intention to make these documents widely available.



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