



Material Memory

Tracing the narratives of materials



In today's world, nearly everything we own is mass-produced. We rarely know where our products come from, how they are made, or who makes them. The only things we truly understand about them are their price and function. This detachment strips objects of any personal significance, reducing them to mere commodities in an endless cycle of consumption.

We buy, not out of necessity or appreciation, but often out of habit, impulse, or societal pressure. And just as easily as we acquire, we discard—sometimes not because something is broken or obsolete, but simply to make room for the next purchase. Our relationship with material goods has become fleeting and disposable, driven by an economy that thrives on perpetual consumption.

This detachment from the origins and craftsmanship of what we own creates a culture where objects lose their meaning. In contrast to past generations, who often had a deeper connection to the things they possessed—whether through personal craftsmanship, repair, or an understanding of their value—we now exist in a system where convenience trumps quality, and abundance diminishes appreciation.

But what is the cost of this way of living? Are we sacrificing not only sustainability but also a sense of fulfillment? If we were to slow down, to value craftsmanship and longevity over speed and disposability, could we redefine our relationship with the material world?

Premise

This project explores the significance of materials as carriers of history, transformation, and human craftsmanship. In a time when mass production has stripped objects of their origins and meaning, this work seeks to reconnect us with the deeper narratives embedded in the materials around us.

Materials are not just passive substances; they carry stories within them. They hold traces of the processes they have undergone, the transformations they have experienced, and the hands that shaped them into something meaningful. Every material has a past—it bears witness to the labor, the craftsmanship, and the cultural traditions that have given it form.

Far from being mere objects of utility, materials can serve as windows into history. They connect us not only to the present moment but also to the past, revealing the ways in which generations before us worked with, valued, and understood the world around them. From the weathered wood of an old ship to the handwoven textiles of an ancient culture, these materials tell stories of innovation, survival, and human expression.

Why Clay?

Clay is a material that perfectly embodies the ideas at the heart of this project. It is one of the oldest and most fundamental materials used by humanity, carrying with it a deep historical and cultural significance. From ancient pottery and architectural structures to contemporary ceramics, clay has been shaped by countless hands over millennia, preserving the imprints of craftsmanship, tradition, and necessity.

By working with clay, this project explores not just its physical properties but also its role as a carrier of cultural memory, craftsmanship, and collective heritage.



Approach

To fully understand the lifecycle of clay, I chose to source my own wild clay from the landscapes around Barcelona. Rather than working with commercially processed material, I wanted to engage directly with the earth—to experience firsthand how clay is found, extracted, and transformed.

I visited three distinct locations, each with its own geological and environmental characteristics, collecting soil samples as a way to ground myself in the local context. This process allowed me to explore the diversity of natural clay, examining its plasticity, texture, and composition. Through sourcing and processing the material myself, I gained insight into the labor and transformation involved—an experience that deepens the connection between maker, material, and place.

By working with wild clay, this project not only investigates the material's physical properties but also its relationship to the landscape and history.



Parc Natural de la Serra de Collserola

A protected natural reserve which is home to a variety of flora and fauna. The route from Restaurant Leka to Can Sarda displays a variety of biodiversity and conditions that were reflected in the soil samples found.



Parc del Guinardó, Barcelona

A hill park overlooking Barcelona, which used to be a private estate before becoming municipal property in 1910.

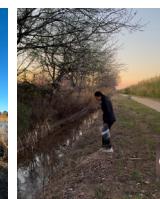


Context



Delta area, Hospital de Llobregat

A complex landscape located near El Prat Airport, where the Llobregat river meets the sea, surrounded by a nature reserve.



Process

Levigating (Filtering & Purifying) – You're refining the clay to remove impurities, ensuring it's smooth and workable.

Settling – You're allowing the fine particles to separate, which directly impacts the texture and plasticity of your final clay.

Drying – You're waiting about a week for the clay to reach a moldable consistency, balancing moisture for optimal workability.

Wedging & Kneading – You're preparing the clay for use, ensuring it's consistent and free of air pockets before shaping.

Creating Samples – You're making test pieces to evaluate how your processed clay behaves when shaped and dried.

Firing – The final step in testing how well your clay withstands high temperatures, helping you determine if adjustments are needed.



Processing Soil to extract clay :

Using the levigation method, it was possible to extract clay from the soil samples. Filtered the soil using water to remove any impurities like stones, gravel or twigs. Once that is done, the clay settles at the bottom leaving clear water at the top which can be discarded.

Making Process & Craftsmanship



Working with Harvested Clay



Firing



Observations :

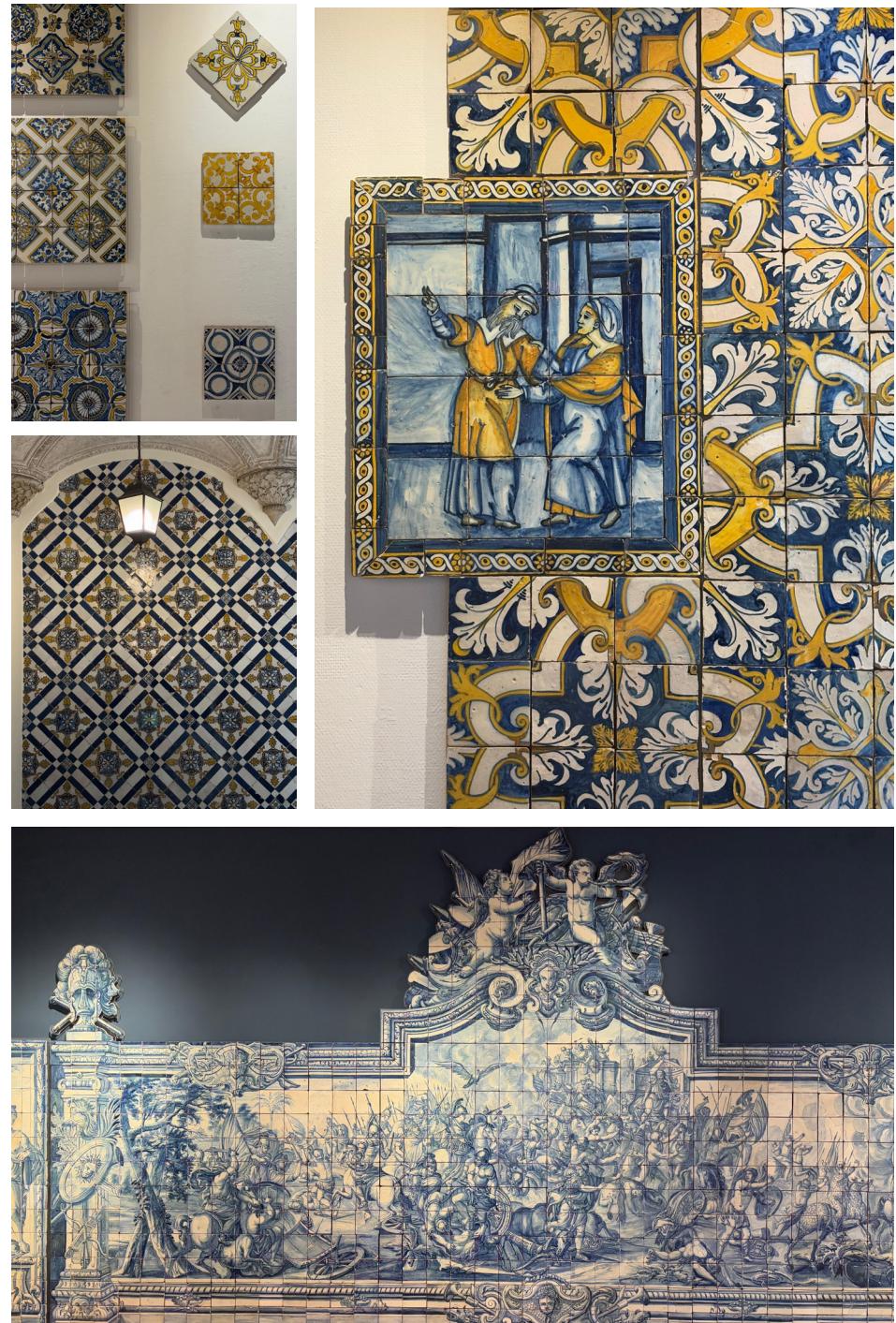
The samples from Collserola park contained a higher amount of **Iron Oxide**, giving it a deep terracotta colour. On the other hand, the sample from Delta area which contained more silt than clay, turned into a pinkish buff colour,

Historical Context

A month ago, I had the opportunity to visit Lisbon, Portugal. While there, I explored the National Tile Museum, which showcases the rich history of Portugal's iconic tiles, or azulejos. What struck me was how these tiles, now so deeply embedded in Portuguese identity, were not originally from Portugal. They were first imported from Seville and Valencia in Spain before local production began, transforming them from a foreign import into a national symbol.

But the story doesn't stop there. Portugal's colonial history carried these tiles far beyond its borders. In Goa, India—a former Portuguese colony—traces of this influence remain. Even after more than 75 years of independence, many Goan houses still feature Portuguese tiles on their facades. These tiles, which once arrived in Portugal from Spain, then traveled across continents, embedding themselves into different cultures and landscapes.

What this reveals is how a single material can tell a story of global socio-political history—of trade, colonization, and independence—while also carrying an enduring sense of cultural identity. This is the power of materials—they carry stories, traditions, and identities across time and space.



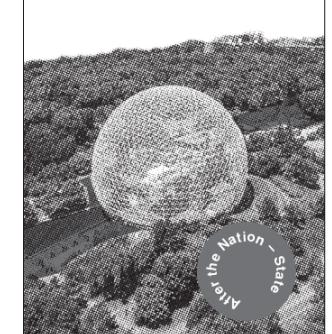
Political Context

Referencing Tracing the Commons Through Clay, an essay by Chilean architects Daniela Salgado Cofré and Álvaro Mercado Jara, we see how materials are deeply intertwined with geography, identity, and governance. Their research explores a pottery community in Chile, focusing on the historical practice of sourcing materials locally and how this has shaped both cultural identity and community resilience. However, they also highlight how legal and political frameworks influence these practices, sometimes restricting access to local resources and, in turn, affecting the traditions built around them.

This brings up an important consideration when working with local materials: sourcing is not just a technical or environmental question but also a legal and systemic one. Even as mindsets shift towards valuing local materials and traditional building practices, policy must evolve alongside them. Without legal support and frameworks that facilitate sustainable local sourcing, these practices face challenges in becoming viable on a broader scale. True progress requires not only a cultural shift but also a structural one—where policies align with evolving perspectives on material use and craftsmanship.



RURAL FUTURES



Material Memory explores materials as vessels of history, culture, and human touch, moving beyond their role in mass production to uncover their origins, lifecycle, and deeper narratives. Through hands-on making, storytelling, and sensory engagement, the project highlights the imperfections, labor, and traditions embedded in materials—fostering awareness and dialogue rather than prescribing solutions.

Taking this approach forward, the research can extend beyond clay to other natural materials—exploring craft and vernacular building practices as a way of carrying forward traditional wisdom in working with local resources. By engaging with artisans, designers, and conservationists, Material Memory envisions a future where material consciousness supports sustainable, place-based ways of making and building.