MODEM Dialogues - In conversation with Eduarda Abbondanza

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Eduarda Abbondanza. President of the ModaLisboa Association

Portrait Eduarda Abbondanza ® Pedro Moura Simão
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MODEM:
In a period when the aesthetic opulence of the 1980s evolved into new creative directions, the supermodel era shaped global ideals, and the fashion industry was beginning to move toward faster production and trend cycles that would later define fast fashion, you co-founded ModaLisboa. Could you describe the motivations that led you to initiate this platform?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
My motivations were somewhat removed from that international movement, as it hadn't yet reached Portugal. In Lisbon we were living a creative awakening, a post-revolution generation reclaiming artistic ground suppressed during the dictatorship. After the April 25 revolution, there was a sense of hope and possibility. By the 1980s, new movements were emerging in photography, music, visual arts, design, and women's magazines. It was an effervescent moment.

At the end of that decade, **Mário Matos Ribeiro** and I, then working as art directors for the country's largest apparel fair, gained a deep understanding of Portuguese industry while designing capsule collections that showcased local manufacturing.
When the Lisbon City Council invited us to create a collective fashion show for the Lisbon

Festivities, we accepted. From that experience, the idea of a professional platform to launch Portuguese design took shape.

Coming out of the revolution, we were deeply shaped by democracy, and believed it was a democratic act to create a platform making designer fashion accessible to everyone.

MODEM:
The power-dressing movement of the 1970s and 1980s aimed to strengthen women's presence in professional contexts. In the early 1990s, you were working in a largely male-dominated environment. How did you assert your voice and presence within the industry at that time?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
There wasn't really an industry, only production, and yes, that world was male-dominated. We were building fashion from the ground up: education, design, professional practice. I often say, "*I didn't know I couldn't, so I did.*" We worked as a duo of two genders, and I never truly internalized that society might limit me because I was a woman. That made me fearless. Over time, we naturally divided roles according to our strengths. In certain negotiations or formal settings, Mário often led - not because I couldn't, but because the people across the table were men, and communication was smoother that way. Our dynamic allowed us to play with gender balance strategically, and it worked to our advantage.

MODEM:
Over three decades, you have transformed a local initiative into a cultural reference. Which guiding principles have endured, even as form and audience have continued to change?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
Inclusion, always. Fashion must involve everyone. Democracy: fashion itself isn't democratic, but our work must be. We strive to expand access and impact. Creative freedom: transversal and essential. And above all, an understanding of fashion as a cultural and artistic discipline that must exist in freedom, constantly evolving with the times. The defense and expansion of fashion design education through close collaboration with schools. In addition to that, we have never closed ourselves within a fixed model. We continuously question what must change and evolve, fine-tuning our strategy to communicate Portuguese fashion from within its own context. We work collectively with advisory boards that help us think about the present and future, ensuring that our relevance is never static.

MODEM:
Associação ModaLisboa champions sustainability, inclusion, and transparency. Where do you see the biggest challenges in operating within a still-exclusive industry, especially regarding openness about sustainable practices?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
Working primarily with independent designers means that sustainability challenges differ from those of fast fashion. Production is smaller, waste is minimal, and materials are carefully managed.The real challenges lie in legislation and in ensuring protection for brands already committed to sustainable principles, especially within Europe, which leads in policy, research, and innovation in this field. Protecting this ecosystem must go hand in hand with taxing those who disregard it. And, crucially, we need consumers to stay engaged and informed. Their

awareness drives accountability across the system.

MODEM:
When observing the emerging generation of Portuguese designers, by what signs do you recognize that a creative vision has the capacity to influence a broader cultural dialogue?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
This new generation grew up connected to the world, with access to knowledge, technology, and tools that allow them to approach creation in unprecedented ways. Their global awareness, combined with technical and conceptual fluency, gives them a rare ability to rethink processes of communication, distribution, and authorship itself. It is precisely this expanded worldview that enables them to engage with Portugal's vast and deeply rooted cultural heritage from new perspectives. Their dialogue with craft, tradition, and local identity generates proposals that stand apart from global trends, combining ancestral know-how with contemporary experimentation. This unique convergence, between heritage and innovation, local grounding and global consciousness, represents an inimitable contribution to the worldwide conversation on fashion and culture.

MODEM:
You are also engaged in academic teaching. How can creativity, education, and industry be aligned to ensure that Portuguese fashion remains both economically viable and artistically free?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
Europe's fashion industry, driven by increasingly strict sustainability policies, faces a decisive turning point. If it fails to adapt, production will inevitably move elsewhere. To remain competitive, we must reinforce the connection between creativity and production, not as separate forces, but as parts of a shared ecosystem. Technology, automation, and artificial intelligence are transforming the way we produce. Yet these tools should not serve only to replace human labor; they must open space for new creative intervention. Research and development need imagination as much as technical skill.

Every innovation, whether material, digital, or procedural, depends on creative thinkers who can question, reinterpret, and propose alternatives. That's why the relationship between education, industry, and creativity is so crucial. Schools must not isolate artistic training from the realities of production and business, just as the industry must not overlook the value of creative inquiry. When these spheres collaborate, when designers, engineers, and educators share the same language, we build systems that are not only economically sustainable, but also intellectually and artistically free.

MODEM:
While young labels often receive attention, especially during global fashion weeks, many industry professionals work behind the scenes. Can fashion platforms ensure that these "invisible" contributors also benefit from support, for example through recognition or at least fair compensation?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
Perhaps because we operate differently from the major global fashion systems, and we're not limited to runway formats, our platform includes projects dedicated to thought, education, and production. This gives visibility to researchers, manufacturers, students, teachers, and sector

associations in textiles, footwear, and beyond. These contributors - often invisible elsewhere - find recognition here. We aim to make their work part of the broader narrative, not a hidden one.

MODEM:
Discussions around well-being are gradually gaining ground in creative industries. What structural measures do you believe could best support the psychological health of fashion professionals?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
It’s increasingly evident that the current system is unsustainable. The pace, pressure, and competition are overwhelming. Each professional must find and accept their own rhythm, stepping away from the constant demand for novelty and experimenting with alternative business models that align with their creative nature. At the same time, fashion platforms working in communication, distribution, and retail must adapt to new ways of working. Only by supporting human-centered practices can we shift toward a system that values people over products.

MODEM:
Reflecting on the role of empathy in leadership, those in senior positions are expected to foster a culture of care and support. Might this ever conflict with market-driven demands?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
Empathy, care, and collaboration are not in conflict with market demands. In my opinion, they actually strengthen our ability to meet them. Leadership must be close to its team, not isolated. A leader who understands the market must also understand the individuals who sustain their creations. Recognizing the uniqueness of each person is essential to building resilient, responsive structures.

MODEM:
If a new designer were to draw inspiration from your path while facing uncertainty about the future, explain a single insight you would hope they carry as they define their own direction?

EDUARDA ABBONDANZA:
When I work with young generations, I always ask myself: what can I contribute to make this person happier, more self-sufficient, more capable of thinking critically about the world and themselves? I hope my role helps them expand that awareness, and become excellent professionals in whatever path they choose. I encourage them to understand themselves and their environment, their community, their resources, but above all their natural inclinations.

Regardless of market pressure, family expectations, or ambition, they must identify what truly belongs to them, what is authentic. Once they find it, they should pursue it fully. So much of life depends on small, seemingly irrelevant things. You may have an extraordinary gift that you undervalue because you aspire to something else. Recognize it. Honor it. Fulfillment comes from doing what aligns with your nature, and building a life that allows you to thrive independently.