



Anne-Sophie Flores

Co-founder and director, Cōmi Design, *Lyon, France*

design@comistudio.com

Anne-Sophie Flores is a French-Mexican food and product designer based in Lyon, France. She holds a Master's degree in Food Design and is the co-founder of Cōmi Design, a studio specialising in food and branding design. Her multicultural background deeply informs her work, which explores the intersections between culture, sustainability, and sensory experience. Through projects like *Olotl*, she aims to transform local traditions and food waste into opportunities for sustainable innovation, bridging craft, ecology, and design thinking.

Olotl: Reimagining Corn Waste Through Food Design

Anne-Sophie Flores

Abstract

This article explores *Olotl*, a food design project by French-Mexican designer Anne-Sophie Flores, developed from corn cobs "*Olotl*" in Nahuatl, meaning the skeleton of maize. Rooted in Mexico's cultural and agricultural heritage, the project transforms this underused by-product into a biodegradable material for tableware, addressing both environmental and social challenges. By creating a circular economy model in rural communities, *Olotl* aims to empower women artisans while reducing plastic waste generated by street food vendors. Through this case study, she reflects on the potential of food design to connect sustainability, culture, and identity, highlighting how design can bridge tradition and innovation while serving as a catalyst for ecological awareness and inclusive development.

Keywords: Circular economy, sustainability, biodegradable, food design, Mexican corn.

I know you are here because you expect to read an analysis or a research study but the truth is, I wanted to write you a letter. A story about where I come from, what I design, and why. You might be wondering how a young dreamer from Mexico ended up in France. People often ask me, "*Why aren't you in Mexico if you love it so much?*" And they are right—I always say, "*Mexico has everything.*"

Yet, here I am, living in Lyon, building my dreams one project at a time.

No matter where I go, my culture follows me. It lives in my accent, my name, and the way I approach design. Even while in Europe, I have always felt a responsibility to give visibility to my culture. For me, design is more than a form or aesthetics—it is a way to create value through social, economic, and ecological impact.

The Birth of Olotl

That philosophy came to life during my master's degree in Food Design, when I created *Olotl*. The word “*Olotl*” comes from Nahuatl, meaning *corn cob*, the skeleton of maize.

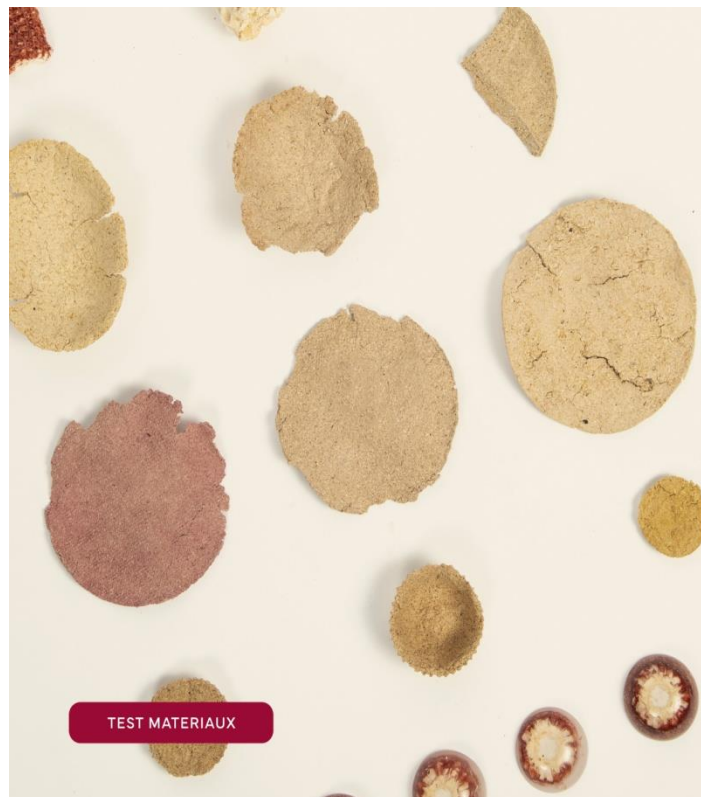
In Mexico, maize is more than food; it is our identity. My father, a social anthropologist, used to tell me that Mexico's true gold was never the mineral, it was the corn. During colonisation, we gave away our precious metals, but we protected our roots.

During my research, I discovered that the corn cob, despite being part of every harvest, was rarely reused. In rural areas, farmers often burn it, releasing black smoke harmful to both the environment and their health. That observation became the foundation of *Olotl*: transforming what was considered waste into a valuable material. Through experimentation, I developed a substance with similar properties to cork—rigid yet flexible, natural yet strong. When dyed with hibiscus, it revealed beautiful pink tones, proving its aesthetic and material potential.

From Waste to Resource

The next challenge was contextual: how could this material respond to a real problem in Mexico? While eating *esquites*, a popular street food dish made from corn, I noticed the large amount of single-use plastic generated by vendors every night. When I asked one vendor why he still used plastic, he said, “ *It’s cheaper.*” That moment became the turning point.

Mexico’s 800,000+ food stalls generate thousands of tons of waste daily, much of it non-biodegradable. *Olotl* proposes a simple solution: using the corn cob waste to produce biodegradable plates. The design allows two plates to fit together, creating an easy *to-go* container that naturally decomposes after use.



Testing bio-material: Olotl 2019 © Anne-Sophie Flores.



Biodegradable plate made from corn cob waste: Olotl 2019 © Anne-Sophie Flores.

***Olotl* goes beyond sustainability, it aims for circularity. The vision is to establish cooperatives where women in rural communities can manufacture the plates using local corn waste. This model not only reduces pollution but also creates new economic opportunities and educational value for children who learn about ecology through participation.**

Design as a Bridge

At its heart, *Olotl* is not only a design project but also a social statement. It connects craft, ecology, and cultural identity through material innovation. It reflects a belief that design should serve as a bridge between tradition and technology, between local communities and global conversations.

After completing *Olotl*, my path took another turn. Following my experience in Madrid, where I discovered how rapidly food design was evolving, I decided to return to France and open my own studio.

Today, I co-direct Cōmi Design, a studio based in Lyon specialising in food and branding design. The name *Cōmi* carries a double meaning *commis* in French means “kitchen assistant,” while *comí* in Spanish means “I ate.” It perfectly represents the blend of my two worlds.

Running a business is a constant learning curve, but it allows me to design experiences that awaken emotions and connect people through food. When I say I am a food designer, people often ask, “What *is that?*” Even my parents needed years to understand it. But once people experience it, they always leave with curiosity, reflection, or awe, and that is when I know design has done its job.

What Food Design Means to Me

To me, food design is a multidisciplinary practice combining product, graphic, and spatial design to create sensory experiences that evoke emotion and awareness. It is about using food as a medium to tell stories, question systems, and build connections. By integrating color, texture, material, and space, we can design not just objects but moments. *Olot!* embodies that philosophy: a humble material turned into a message of renewal.

Because in the end, design is not only about creating things it is about creating meaning.

And for me, it all began with a single grain of corn.



Nila Rezaei RK Collective

Nila Rezaei is an Iranian-Australian industrial designer, educator, and co-founder of RK Collective, a female-led design studio focused on ethical innovation and social impact. Her practice weaves material storytelling, co-design, and cultural memory into products and experiences that honour the emotional and political dimensions of design. Nila's internationally recognised project *Crafted Liberation* transforms discarded headscarves into stadium seats, reclaiming symbols of exclusion through participatory design.

Nila teaches at UNSW Art & Design, where she mentors emerging designers in socially engaged practice. Nila is a Good design Australia Ambassador and Chair of the NSW Council at Design Institute of Australia (DIA). She lives and works on unceded Gadigal land (Sydney), where she continues to explore design as a method of healing, resistance, and continuity.

The Distance Between Two Homes

Nila Rezaei

Abstract

This article is a personal reflection on design as a bridge between cultures, memories, and identities. As a young Iranian woman who migrated to Australia to pursue design at the age of 19, I found myself suspended between two homes, between constraint and freedom, silence and voice. This in-between space, once a site of grief and displacement, became the method that shaped my practice.

I trace my journey from a determined design student absorbing 'Western' framework to an educator and studio founder who now teaches through co-design, cultural memory, and emotional resonance. I share how reclaiming my Persian heritage transformed the way I teach, make, and lead, not by rejecting what I learned, but by weaving it with what I remembered.

My work, including the project Crafted Liberation, which transforms discarded Iranian headscarves into stadium seats, is an extension of this philosophy: that design can be a vessel for healing, protest, and belonging. This piece is not just about a career. It is about how design held me, and how it became language when I had none, and how it continues to offer a seat, not just for me, but for those still waiting to be seen.

The Distance Between Two Homes

I arrived in Australia with a suitcase, a university admission, and a secret promise: that I would make this move worth it. I had left my mother behind, my language behind, my home behind. So I worked like it mattered, because it did.

Design school was a world I had only imagined. Clean lines. Process maps. Words like “methodology” and “human-centred.” I was captivated. Every week I learned something that felt like a small superpower. I was determined to become a “good designer,” which, back then, I thought meant mastering the Western canon: Bauhaus, Brutalism, Scandinavian minimalism. I was obsessed. I treated it like religion, and maybe I still do.

It took me years to notice what was missing.

The In-Between is the Method

I never thought to bring my culture into my work. I believed design was neutral, and that neutrality meant Western. It was not until years later, after I began working professionally, that the ache arrived, slowly, then all at once.

I remembered the textures of my childhood: my mother’s stitches, my grandmother’s carpet, the rhythm of Persian poetry on the radio. I remembered the way we fixed broken things, the way beauty was not separate from survival. And I realised: I had been taught to see design as an invention. But where I come from, design is inheritance.

That is when my practice began to change. I started asking different questions—not just “how does this work?” but “ what does this remember?” or “ Who is this serving?” I began designing from absence. And I realised the “ in-between” was not a weakness. It was a method. A lens. A power.

A Seat We Were Never Given

In 2022, when Mahsa Amini was killed in Iran, something in me cracked open. The Women, Life, Freedom movement flooded the streets of Tehran, and the silence in exile became unbearable. I felt powerless. But then I remembered: my tools are not banners, but materials.

That year, I started *Crafted Liberation*, a project that transforms discarded Iranian headscarves into stadium seats, the very seats women have been banned from occupying in Iran since 1981. I put out a call. Scarves arrived from around the world, each one carrying stories, loss, anger, love. We worked with an Australian manufacturer to create a new composite material, one part textile, one part grief, all recycled. The result: functional, poetic, unignorable.

Crafted Liberation is not just a product. It is a protest made into a beautiful, colourful seat. A seat made from refusal. And yet, it is also gentle, a quiet rebellion. That paradox lives at the heart of everything I now design.

Teaching from the Heart, Not the Slide Deck

As an educator, I teach students to listen to memory, to experience, theirs and others. I teach them that co-design is not a buzzword; it

is a belief system. We start from lived experience. Always. The stories we carry are not side notes; they are the insight.

When students realise that design can help them heal, everything shifts. They no longer chase outcomes; they follow feelings. We speak about memory, power, displacement. We question the rules. We provoke gently. I often tell them: Design is not just how something works. It is how something feels. And feeling is what makes us stay.

To me, design is like music, not the sheet music, but the rhythm that makes people move together, without instruction. It creates space for beauty, for emotion, for understanding. It does not solve loneliness. But sometimes, it sings to it.

A Practice Rooted in Continuity

Today I lead a female-led studio, RK Collective, where we centre ethics, circularity, and care. We build systems and products, yes, but we also build stories. In our work, design is not just solution-oriented. It is memory-keeping. It is making space for what the world does not always want to see: grief, softness, complexity, culture.

I no longer try to be a " good Western designer." I am a Persian woman who designs. I carry centuries of improvisation, joy, protest, craft. I am a daughter, a teacher, an exile, a maker. I am all of these things, not in conflict, but in constellations.

Closing Reflection: The Thread Between Homes

Design held me when I did not have words, as I grew into womanhood. It became a way to belong when language failed. It gave me a seat, and now, through my work, I offer seats to others. Not just literal ones, like those in *Crafted Liberation*, but metaphorical ones too: places to be heard, to remember, to speak. The distance between two homes never disappears.

But in design, I have found a thread that stitches them together. My practice is that stitching; imperfect, soft, resilient. Now, I want every material, every object, every system I touch to empower, to tell a more beautiful story of becoming. Of resistance. Of joy.

This is the design I choose. Not from the centre, but from the edges. To make with intention To make resistance visible. To continue my mother's step, and her mother's and all beautiful women of Iran ...