

DESIGN.LIVES: DESIGNING FOR THE POLITICS OF SELF-ACTUALISATION

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ABSTRACT:

In 2009, we, a team of a design researcher and a sociologist launched the DESIGN.LIVES to conduct design labs for/with different organisations to coach people how to design participation for social inclusion as well as designing their own lives. Apart from reflection on teaching and learning experiences for designers, our constant concern is how we guide active design-partners to experience design processes as ways to participate in the politics of choice/self-actualisation. In this paper, we use Giddens' distinction of 'emancipatory/life politics' to discuss the intentions, processes and results of our labs. We examined a project that began under the influence of life politics - providing training to spinal-cord injured patients, enabling them to explore designing as a life skill - and how the organizer intended to use the pilot project to influence mainstream design education. We reflected on how social sciences inform design practices and the quality of participation through design.

1. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND DESIGN

How do social sciences relate to design as a discipline? To answer this question, we refer to definitions of the two disciplines. According to UK's research council, *'Social science is ... the study of society and the manner in which people behave and influence*

the world around us... Like all sciences, social sciences evolve through the interplay of the ideas and theories of academics and the evidence that supports or refutes them' (www.esrc.ac.uk). This is a very general understanding of the nature of social science, in which it is regarded as an ideal type of universalizing predictive theory. Since the last decade, the

advocacy of the views that social science, apart from chasing universalizing knowledge, should turn their attention on 'contexts' as it is this factor that makes the apparently similar human action differently performs. Given that social science is to study human action, 'contexts' should be taken into consideration and be regarded as a factor that makes universalising predictive and explanatory theory difficult to attain. Furthermore, as 'contexts' is unique in every single case of study, social scientists will find it difficult to use universalising knowledge to conduct their academic research and should employ their tacit and background knowledge to realise their academic endeavour. In other words, social science endeavour is pragmatic in nature. This thus comes close to the nature of design.

Here we take a more pragmatic definition is for design: 'Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end...Most of the results of design are visible,' and that lends itself to another simple definition: 'Design is all around you, everything man-made has been designed, whether consciously or not' (Cox, 2005). Thus Mat Hunter, chief design officer of UK Design Council, focused on a more specific question, 'how can I use good design to make the world around me better?'

To us, both social science and design are pragmatic and practical in nature. They share the wisdom from phronetic social science, a view drawn from Aristotle's word for practical wisdom (Flyvbjerg, 2001). However, we do not mix up knowledge from social science and that from design. Perhaps, there exist different bounded scopes of applicability between these two disciplines. In order to explore answers to this question further, we, a design researcher and a sociologist, set up our collaboration and entitled the collaboration; DESIGN.LIVES. It is guided by the main theme of social inclusion so as to see how social scientists and designers would practice differently and makes different impacts of design research and education.

Over the past three years, our actions were to conduct customised design labs for/with different organisations to 'coach' people in how to design

participation for social inclusion as well as designing their own lives. Our method is to create stimulating situations for designers to co-design with older and disabled people. In order to make sure our method worked efficiently, apart from the main goal of training participants who want to learn about social design methodology, we also engage 'users' in or before our labs, to 'coach' them to be our active-design partners. Our goal is to inspire all parties to 'design' new ways of living. The core aim of our collaboration is to ensure there are mutually beneficial processes between designers and users as well as stimulating new ways of designing.

1.1 EMANCIPATORY AND LIFE POLITICS

Aiming at practising phronetic social science, we aspire to have practical impact beyond conventional propositional knowledge. The first question, according to phronetic social science, is to understand where we are going. In order to answer this question, we could adopt British sociologist Anthony Giddens' (1991) clear distinction between emancipatory politics and life politics so as to identify the political aims of our practice. While the former refers to *'a generic outlook concerned above all with liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect*

their life chances', life politics refers to *'a politics of choices...Life politics concern political issues which flow from processes of selfactualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realisation influence global strategies.'* This distinction triggered new social policy development in the UK that made "life politics" (the politics of self-actualisation) more visible than "emancipatory politics" (the politics of inequality). In our view, we take life-politics as the aim of our design labs activities because we should know the domain in which we could have our practical impacts. We then decided to achieve the realization of life-politics by people with disabilities as the ultimate practical concern of our intervention. The second question we should pose according to phronetic social science is about who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power. This leads us to pay more attention on the evaluation of the outcome of our design practice and also investigate the mechanisms of

power by which some can gain and some lose. The existence of power in our view is the first identifiable factor that refrain participants from freely practicing their life-politics (Lee, et al., 2011).

2. DESIGN FROM INEQUALITY TO SELFACTUALISATION

Knowledge from social science offers us the aim of design practice, which is life-politics. Our design practice shows us that participation in design would be affected by experts' power. In order to find more effective ways of coaching life-politics, since 2009, we have reflected on our practices through interviewing our active-design-partners. By using Bourdieu's idea (1984) of the existence of habitus, we found that participants in our design labs were affected by their spontaneity without consciousness or will in informing their choices and practices in constructing their daily lives. We found that both designers and active design partners would embrace some burgeoning ideas arising from our desire to actualise our selves, which would be fragile and vulnerable in the face of experts and professions. From our findings, we noticed that the process of creation and design is about conscious and unconscious deliberation between the designers and the active design partners. However, for our active design partners especially those with disabilities, even though having shown their anticipation of more freedom and self-actualisation, they would conform to the socially desirable view of being representative of the collective interest of people with disabilities. They were imbued with the ideas from emancipatory politics (Ho, et al, 2009)

For example, we interviewed one of our long-term partners who is a wheelchair user and the dialogue was filled with his imagining a new social model. He has been a social activist on an individual basis for a long period but came to think in more collective terms (Ibid). In this case, emancipatory politics becomes his background knowledge and his primary tactics is to voice out the political demands of the collective interest of people with disabilities. In our view, the primary habitus is certain extent suppress any consideration of individual interest.

2.1 ENGAGEING DESIGN. LIVES PARTNERS, HONG KONG

In view of the powerful habitus functioning as the tacit knowledge of those disadvantageous people at the level of the lifeworld, we take chances of organising our labs to realise life politics for the participants in our labs. Our major tactics is to spend more efforts to coach the 'extreme users' and guide them to become active design-partners to take over the design processes during the design labs. The concept of unique life experience was employed to inspire creative designs. In Hong Kong, our approach is to work with individuals. Of course, our design training programmes are designed for team working between design students or those who want to experience inclusive/social design processes. However, for 'extreme users' to 'active-design-partners', we focus on one-to-one interactions and develop long-term relationships. For example, one of our key active-design-partners is a 30 yearold skin cancer patient - born with the disease. He has been involved in tutorials with the second author since 2008. He constantly resists the role of passive participant or 'extreme user' in our labs. Recently, he became the 'designer' of his own 'living funeral' (fig 1) and started to be a full-time funeral 'designer' to endeavour ways to celebrate death.



Figure 1 The 1st Living Funeral in Hong Kong designed by a born-skin-cancer-patient

2.2 DESIGN & REHABILITATION PROJECT, LONDON

In the UK context, in which different programmes such as advanced study modules and design competitions in inclusive design have been introduced to influence mainstream design education. However, it is hard to quantify the impact of education especially for the alternative format. One example is the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce): an enlightenment organisation/ a registered charity, committed to finding innovative practical solutions to today's social challenges. Its

student design awards scheme is the oldest award scheme with the goal of linking education and industry in beneficial partnerships and it has been a well-established platform to promote and test new design issues such as inclusive design and other social concepts within the education system. Apart from important and influential alumni such as Jonathan Ive, its direct impact is still difficult to quantify.

It has a history of combining action and research and a strong link with social policies, which provides the RSA Projects team opportunities to explore more issues regarding design and society. The RSA's Design & Society team initiated the Design & Rehabilitation Project in 2009 as part of their RSA Projects to explore design for resourcefulness and self-reliance. Its main aim is to develop design training for people with spinal cord injuries. Why this specific group? Campbell (2011) former Director of Design who initiated the project explained, *'[i]t's well-recognised that spinal-cord-injured (and other disabled) people have an acute need for design...but the principle underlying my project is more that design as a discipline, or thought-process, can help alleviate the dramatic loss of confidence and diminished motivation that can result from a sudden physical impairment. As a structured way of approaching problems, design can help to rebuild confidence.'*

There is already a successful model by the spinal injury units and spinal injury charities in the UK to use sport as a means of self-actualisation and social reintegration following a devastating injury. However, Campbell argued that there might need to be more choices because not everyone is into sport and it will not change if you break your back or neck. She is looking for a diverse way of self-actualisation within other aspects of life – social and cultural habits, personal relationships, household management, parenting, seeing the world, etc.

This was the rationale for a pilot three-day design workshop in Nov 2010, conceived, developed and led by three designers (first author of this paper was one of the workshop leaders) in collaboration with Back-Up, the national charity for spinal cord injury. There were three aims of the workshop:

1. To inspire spinal cord-injured people to think creatively like a designer
2. To give spinal cord-injured people confidence and independence by teaching them creative design tools and techniques
3. To establish an effective workshop format replicable by the RSA with other groups

Eight spinal cord injured patients registered interest in the 'course' and they were interviewed in advance about creativity, confidence, independence and design. Thus, the participants were invited to London (some people travelled from outside London and they were put in a hotel near the workshop venue) to participate in the workshop. The three workshop days were themed as **Observation, Analysis and Opportunity**. The task was to explain design to people who had never encountered it before through three stages of designing:

I. **Day One: Observation** with two exercises entitled, *'I've noticed that...'* as the self-introduction of themselves by telling the group about four things they'd noticed in the last twenty-four hours. Thus, *'Ways of seeing'* is an assignment for the participants to go out into the neighbourhood with a digital camera and photograph 100 examples (fig 2) of the same thing which aimed to encourage them to put aside their acute, subjective user view and to observe the world differently by looking for specific things.



Figure 2: 82 crosses observed by one of the participants

II. **Day Two: Analysis** was to get participants to understand that man-made things are compounds of elements and layer that the designer has deliberately chosen or specified. There were two exercises to get participants to experience step-by-step.

Analysis exercise 1 was called 'A big dismantling' which asked participants to go out into the surrounding streets and find, photograph or buy something that they could dismantle into its man-made layers and elements. According to participants' feedback, this analysis exercise 1 got the most responses.

'How to take a logo apart. Before I just thought things were cool or not, now I can say why,' expressed by one participant. 'Push to ask why' makes participants think more. Additionally, one participant stressed that 'I enjoyed the rigorous push-push-push from the tutors and I don't do that enough. It's important in the wider business context – people will always find the weak point in your proposition.'



Figure 3: Designing cocktails

The Analysis exercise 2 was called Constructing Layers which each participant was given the name of another, and asked to interview them and design a cocktail – a layered drink – based on what they had learned about that person. The intention was to get participants to practice the analysing character of design. They were asked not to make a cocktail (figure 3) that the other person liked, but a cocktail that they were like. In one participant's words, 'it was a nice, sudden, unorthodox approach; surprising but it made sense with everything else. Surprising that design principles could be applied to something like that; but it has a real physical outcome; something you had to construct.'

III. Day Three: Opportunity, here workshop leaders wanted to help participants to think freely about things that might be designed or redesigned, using observation and analysis techniques practised earlier in the course. The first Opportunity exercise was to ask participants to choose a well-known work of fiction (either a book or a film), and propose a restaurant based on that work, naming a series of its design features.

The final task: Opportunity exercise 2 was the design challenge, 'Make it more pleasurable to eat and drink'. After the period of observation and thinking, the participants divided into two groups depending on whether their concept more closely resembled a 'place' or a 'thing'.

3. REFLECTIONS: PEOPLE, PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS

Working along the lines of phronetic inquiry, the outcomes of our design practices are not academic prescription nor any prepositional knowledge that is cumulative and universal in nature. Phronetic inquiry is guided by the idea that any practices are context-dependent and any academic study finally would come up with examples drawing from our intervention. We ground our discussion in what participants actually do in order to focus on practices rather than theories or discourses. In short, it is example-mode of practical teaching relate to phronetic inquiry.

Our example of design practices offers us three underpinned maxims while conducting the three-day programme. Firstly, 'the workshop deliberately set

out to invoke design principles that were not about taste, but logic. It aimed to give confidence to non-designers that, even if their aesthetic or taste sensibility is weak, and even if they didn't think they could draw, the outcomes of their design process would still have value' (Campbell,2011).

The lack of confidence could be seen as the unintended consequence of the existence of the bounds between designers and participants.

Secondly, the workshop intended to train participants to 'go into the world not as a consumer, but as a designer'. 'Asking novice participants to develop finished product designs that address their own life challenges, for example, would be unrealistic and the results easy to criticise; instead the leaders of the workshop tried to influence and change their ways of seeing and start to designing' (ibid). When participants believed that there existed some kind of expertise ways of seeing, they would not be brave enough to try their own ways of seeing, let alone changing their own ways of seeing. We learned in our labs that obsessing with learning expert's ways of seeing was the other unintended consequences of the boundary between participants and designers.

Finally, the workshop aimed to challenge the notion of design forwith-by. 'The RSA wanted to push beyond the ambition workshop wanted to push beyond the ambition of user-centred design (designing for people), past co-design (designing with people) to a more radical idea that people who are not professional designers might acquire some capability to design for themselves' (ibid).

After the workshop, participants were asked to give feedback and the crucial question was how the workshop benefited them. Short-term responses included '*getting a wheelchair camera stand designed or mobility device prototyped*'. For longer-term effects, one young male participant expressed that '*simply becoming more aware of the designed environment and less fearful of it,*' another male participant was open-minded about the benefits, he suggested that '*spinal cord-injured people should do the course, firstly because design is both practical and empowering; it can suggest a career and it can lead you to solutions in your own life.*'

This pilot workshop became an inspiration for the next phase: the design departments of three universities in the UK who took up the challenge of devising a design-training model for both people in rehabilitation with spinal cord injuries and those living with their injury after discharge, working closely with three of the UK's

eleven specialist units for SCI. A series of pilot design workshops for at three spinal injury centres for rehabilitation inpatients and ex-patients were conducted between October 2011 and February 2012 across the UK. Funded by the Sylvia Adams Charitable Trust and coordinated by the RSA.

While the first pilot workshop was an inspirational model and an example of design for life politics, exploring how design can be a life tool to help people to actualise their own abilities to design for themselves, it also represents the optimal methodology for teaching design to people in rehabilitation. The RSA invited three universities with highly regarded design faculties to propose other approaches: different exercises and thematic frameworks, different research questions, but Campbell (2012) reinsured, 'the principle (for all the projects) that the spinal cord injured participants are themselves the designers.'

While the project began under the influence of life politics by providing training to spinal-cord injured patients to explore designing as a life skill within the rehabilitation programme, the second phase brought the concept into mainstream design education and back to the influences of 'emancipatory politics' (the politics of inequality).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social science knowledge, especially the analysis offered by Giddens convinced us that life-politics could be our aim of our design practice. In our study of the nature of social science, we also learned that phronetic social science could serve as the foundation of any practice, no matter it is social science practice or design practice. On this ground, we follow the direction of

phronetic social science, which suggests that clearly locating our aims of our practice is fundamental. Then, we took life-politics as our aims of our practice.

Following this, our Design.Lives labs have shown that power matters; the mechanism of power in design profession functions through the existence of the covert design 'field' in Bourdieu's sense. One should learn how to get into the professional field of design given that one's purpose is to be a design practitioner. In order to get into the 'field', one needs to learn rule-binding performance. However, the rules underlying a profession such as design have not totally been set on social science or value-based. We understand that design is not a literally objective field. At most, it is what Bourdieu defined as 'a field – even the scientific field – defines itself by (among other things) defining specific stakes and interests, which are irreducible to the stakes and interests specific to other fields...and which are not perceived by someone who has not been shaped to enter that field' (Bourdieu, 1993). Design, like the arts and sport, turns out to be a profession in which stakes, stakeholders, a collection of techniques, references and a set of beliefs, etc. have existed. All these provide the capital by which the differentiation between inside and outside of the field is made, and the functioning of the design field is rendered possible. As Bourdieu pointed out, *'[I]n order for a field to function, there have to be stakes and people prepared to play the game, endowed with the habitus that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field, the stakes, and so on (Ibid. 72).'* This is the ideas learnt from social science. By which, we also learned that participants could not achieve any life-politics and self-actualisation if they just wait for advice and instructions from the expert designers.

In the design field, designers 'consciously or unconsciously' put much emphasises on the uniqueness of their identity as designers since this is one of the essential ways to create design practices as a special field. Its concomitant is a kind of social exclusion as the incumbents (or the people in general) of other social and organisational positions are 'granted' the status and identity as 'the' people outside the professional design field' and those people who are self-recognised as the insider of the design field would determine the functions of the outsiders, that means, 'the people', whoever

and whatever they are. As we know that the 'field' is in fact constituted through exercising power in the establishment of the 'truth', we should persuade all participants, including users and designers, to focus on the significant role of power. In the UK case discussed above, we had put more effort on placing power on the core of our workshops. We took the Foucaultian sense of power more seriously rather than that suggested by Weber who would regard power as something related to domination. As we are concerned with life politics, we persuaded the users to reflect on their ways of thinking, the rationalities underlying their reason, as we take the view that "governmental rationalities" are at work behind every person's mind. Design is a form of practice, and in fact, of social practice, just like social scientists serving as an academia within their social science domain. Both would set their rules and regulation in order to govern. Given that social scientists are subject to methodological and epistemological scrutiny, there is no reason for us to expect that designers could escape from the fate of practitioners.

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