

GALLERY3.3.3: DESIGNING FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HANDICAPS

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ABSTRACT:

In 2013, we, a team of design teachers and students at School of Design of Jiangnan University collaborating with Sunnygroup, a grassroots NGO based in Wuxi, launched the project 'Gallery3.3.3' to conduct design labs for/with people with mental handicaps. The students were divided into three groups and guided to do research at three community care centers for the special population. In the project, we used sets of workshops which stakeholders engaged in to develop our understanding of their ways of thinking and living. Our constant concern is how we, as designers, help to shape a more inclusive society since they, together with their families, are facing tough challenges in pursuing self-actualisation, especially for the mildly mentally handicapped adolescents. In this paper, we refer to art therapy to explore tools, processes and critical artefacts with an aim to trigger debate and discussion. We also present 'Gallery3.3.3' show at China (Wuxi) International Design Expo this year and the feedback from the public as well as the participant design students. Finally, I reflect on the project's influence on the mainstream design education. It is meaningful to see the project as an adventure of design education, an intervention in the social complex.

1. DISADVANTAGED GROUPS AND DESIGN

The appearance of disadvantaged groups is an unavoidable outcome in the process of Chinese social development. People with mental handicaps (hereafter called the MH) for example, are among the most marginalized groups in developing countries (www.who.int). Although in China, there are education schools and care centers especially for the MH, different always means inferior. Research data shows that, they are moving in a narrow circle of life and their potentials are simply ignored, not to mention the group's employment situation.

On the other hand, the flourishing Chinese social organizations involving with commerce, charity and social welfare benefit disadvantaged groups. Like NGOs, they are flexible in adapting to local situations and responding to local needs and therefore able to develop integrated projects, as well as sectoral projects. (www.gdrc.org/ngo)

Furthermore, designers are playing increasingly important role in facilitating social innovation. From this point of view, the value of design is not about problem solving, but about awareness raising and stereotype breaking. With support from the local government, NGOs and other stakeholders, designers can really make a difference in improving the lives of the disadvantaged.

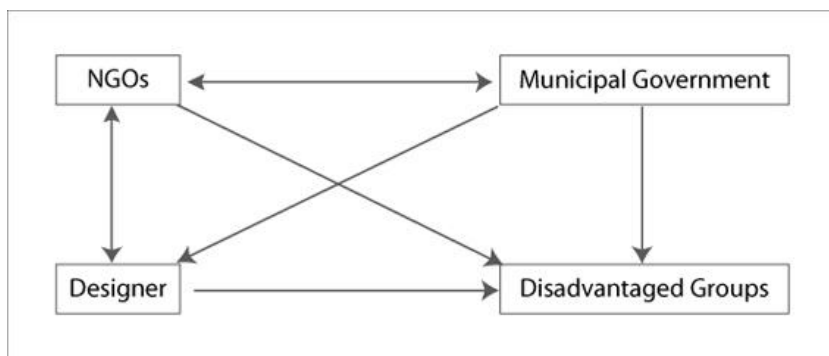


Figure 1: Designers are working in a more complicated social context. The wise way for them to deal with it is to collect resources from different stakeholders and catalyze significant change.

In early 2013, we, a team of design teachers and students at School of Design of Jiangnan University (hereafter called JNU) collaborating with Sunnygroup, a grassroots NGO based in Wuxi, launched the project 'Gallery3.3.3' to conduct design labs for/with the mildly mentally handicapped. The participating students were divided into three groups and guided to do ethnographic research at three community care centers respectively, which were Xiangyang Farm Rehabilitation Center, Binhu District (hereafter called Xiangyang); Helie Disabled Persons' Service Center, Binhu District (hereafter called Helie); Zhide Disabled Persons' Training Center, Wuxi City (hereafter called Zhide).

Methodologically the paper benefits greatly from participatory design and critical design to probe into this social issue.

- Field research will be conducted aiming to capture the semiotic data and grasp the local cultural context through ethnographic engagement.
- We use participatory design approach to attempting to actively involve the MH in with support of the centers' directors and teachers. Design games, deriving from Art Therapy in psychology, are used as tools to communicate with the group, to crack the code of cultural context and to evoke questions within which the MH are contributors as well as beneficiaries.
- Critical Design is used as a way to critique social controversies through designing critical artifacts and art installation is combined as well.

2. DESIGN GAMES

In the project, sets of workshops are organized to promote students' understanding of the group's ways of thinking and living. Students are encouraged to collect data from a semiotic point of view during the process. Three design games are presented below, the first two happening at the service or training centers where the MH usually stay in the day and the last outdoor activity.

2.1. SCROLL DOODLING

Accompanied by surprised praise, a long scroll was rolling out on a long table, and then markers were provided for the MH to choose to draw pictures on the scroll freely. Students interacted with them as they felt hesitated or at a loss.

Traditionally, the format of a handscroll allows for the depiction of a continuous narrative or journey: the viewing of a handscroll is a progression through time and space.

(www.metmuseum.org) Scroll doodling, borrowing the concept and form of a scroll, is one of our successful warm-up games, by which, we, as strangers coming into their life for the first time, can be easily accepted.

The form of doodling presents the concept of sharing and interaction as well, which can always stimulate and encourage people to show what they think out of instinct. Students sometimes naturally join them in. The game provides a sharing platform and a good beginning for people to get to know each other.



Figure 2: Scroll doodling at Zhigu Care Center, Chong'an District, Wuxi City.

2. 2. 'ZHUA ZHOU'

Students put black paper on the ground, various small stuffs being classified and rested on top of the paper. The average age of the MH at Zhide is about 18, smaller than the other two. The director and trainer of the center said they were intellectual equivalent of 6-year-old kids, which was the reason why those 'pretty' things drew the children's attention completely. Most of them had already targeted the things they wanted before it was his or her turn to go to pick it up. A few girls felt tough to make a decision. One boy preferred a small notebook, while another planned to catch a plastic syringe. Later I found the former had an obsessive passion for notebooks, and the latter, however, imagined the syringe to be a gun to play a battle game with it.

The game is called 'Zhuazhou'. As a traditional, long-time custom in China, Zhuazhou is essentially a test where parents place an assortment of articles in front of their child to choose from to determine his or her future inclination and capabilities. The old name is kept, however both subject and function are transformed. The game 'Zhuazhou' exposes unusual stories of the MH although in the beginning they look almost the same or have little difference.



Figure 3: The 'gifts' attracted children's interests when the game Zhuazhou started.

2. 3. INTERACTIVE READING

An outdoor activity was organized in the third week of research. I was trying picture book reading with the children of Zhide and Mrs. Hu, an experienced teacher, was invited to join in. The image below shows the children of Zhide, those people in red enjoyed the game immensely and the students of JNU were sitting between them. Hu did an excellent job. She chose a simple and funny colorful picture book and read to them in an interactive way. In the whole process of reading, she interacted with the MH and the students equally.

By the experiment of interactive reading, the secret languages of communication with the group began to emerge. The 'magic' reading material is easy to thrill them and the feedback after the reading reflected their various ways of thinking. The important value of the experiment is that simple and funny interactions can truly make a difference.



Figure 4: In warm spring day, Xinyi Hu, a volunteer of Sunnygroup, was doing the outdoor interactive reading with the MH of Zhide, companied by the students of JNU.

3. FIELD RESEARCH

Every student of 'Gallery3.3.3' was tutored to use participatory observation as a data collection method. For example, students did the MH's daily routine work while talking with them. It seemed they were part of the MH's big family. Mutual trust could be built gradually. In addition, students were encouraged to do household interview or join their family activities.

Figure 6 covers the dimensions of the group's everyday life, among which family and the care center are the two safest places for them. For most of the MH, bus is an important transportation. They value a small bag of a bus pass, with which they are free to go anywhere as long as they are familiar with the route of the bus numbers. To our surprise, it seems they are quite good at it, even better than the average. Parks and gyms are the places where they spend their leisure time. You could also bump into them in supermarkets or food markets as well. Since they tend to go relatively 'secure' places, facing a normal working environment like a factory or a restaurant, an average community with other people that they are not used to can be a real challenge.



Figure 5: Students were doing the same work as the MH usually do.

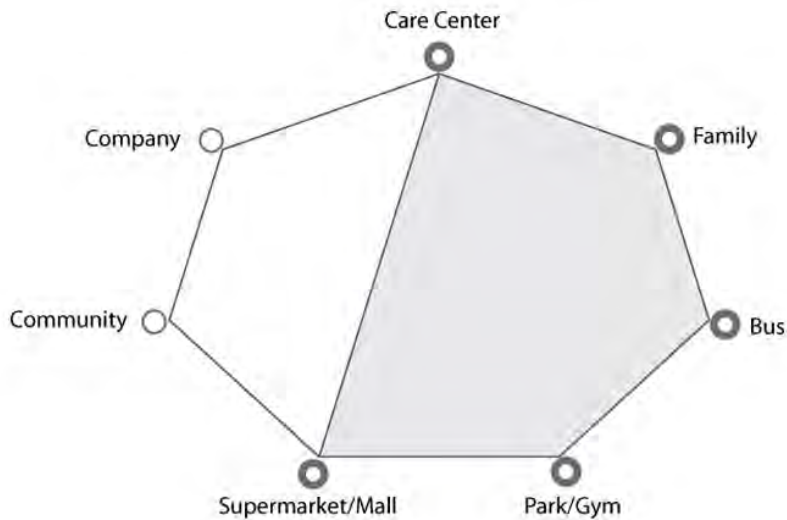


Figure 6: Grey color is the MH's normal living scope in comparison with the white that stands for the possible loss in their life.

4. 'GALLERY3.3.3' SHOW

We finally presented 'Gallery3.3.3' show at China (Wuxi) International Design Expo in May this year. The show included three parts. Each part embodied one of three care centers:

□ Part1: I like you, you like me?

The topic borrowed from expression of boys and girls' at Zhide, conveying their friendship. A group of students extracted symbolic features of 4 children among them and designed a series of tea bags. The descriptive words on the bags were telling stories of them. The taste and flavor of tea triggered people's imagination.

□ Part2: They are all masters.

The MH of Xiangyang demonstrated extraordinary talents in drawing during the field research. These drawings were kept and transformed into accessories such as small bags, mouse pads, card stickers and notebooks.

□ Part3: We are all sick.

Photography and art installation were the two forms to present the research at Helie. These works revealed on the one hand the different life of the MH, problems of the average people's modern life, on the other hand, the same vigorous life endowed in the MH just as every one of us.



Figure 7: Tea bag design by the students of JNU.



Figure 8: Drawings by the MH of Xiangyang.



Figure 9: An experiencing activity, permitting visitors to screw caps on toothpaste tubes and competing speed with the MH.



Figure 10: Two sets of photos. Left: one of the MH; right: one of the students of JNU.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Break barriers, open doors: for an inclusive society for all” is the theme of this year’s International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The “Gallery3.3.3” project is trying to make change towards this direction from designers’ perspectives.

However, this project is an adventure of design education. It is the first time the junior students majoring in industrial design experience a complete process of research focusing on one specific group based on the hybrid of participatory design and critical design. They are directed to be close to the reality of the MH through playing design games and conducting ethnographic research at different levels, through which they know step by step the complicated social context. Moreover, they are tutored to produce critical artifacts and prepare a show to communicate the whole design process to the public. In this sense, "Gallery3.3.3" project is not only about breaking barriers between the disadvantaged and advantaged, but also the barriers between disciplines.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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