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New Direction of Design in Malaysia: Designing for Social Change

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The Need for a Change

In Malaysia, the word 'design' appears to be understood by many as being about the aesthetic and the function of the object created, rather than the process leading to it. This can be seen through the selection of design competitions, design briefs or design outcomes, where the demand is about the finished products, rather than the whole design thinking process behind the creation.

A designer is seen as a person who can make things look better visually, aesthetically; not so much a thinker with the ability to provide strategic design solutions for the client or to improve the brand values and identity of the product. A graphic designer helps, by designing the logo or corporate branding, conceptualizing in visual form the whole client/product/company's identity. There can be more serious thinking there, not just a short few hours spent in front of the computer to create a logo using a tool, following the guidelines provided by the client. Instead, the designer can actually help the client in understanding his needs and translating them into a system of which the visuals will be a part of.

If done properly and with integrity, that thinking is not different from the decision-making that falls under the engineers, marketers, architects, managers, politicians or academics. Designers need to realise that it is also part of their capabilities and responsibilities. A designer should learn to take the fault and to be responsible to any decision made in the design process. It is no longer the time where a designer can blame the printer, the production, the advertiser or the management for failing understanding the design. It may be the designer who failed to convey his/her intentions.

Design as Catalyst for Social Change

So what is the role of designers here? Can design make a change? Can design help to shift the social impact and help to make the world a better place to live? Of course, but then the question becomes: 'how?'. Victor Papanek in his book 'Design for the real world' (1976) - a must read book for all designers or anyone who dreams to be a designer -, reminds designers that 'Design must be an innovative, highly creative, cross-disciplinary tool responsive to the needs of men. It

must be more research-oriented, and we must stop defiling the earth itself with poorly-designed objects and structures.' Design should be for the people and the society, to improve the livelihood, encouraging sustainability rather than short-term outcomes. For that, designers need to start thinking creatively and critically. This thinking does not come naturally; it has to be learned and to be practiced for it to become part of the designer's core values.

In order for that to happen, design needs to be taught differently, critically: both through the understanding of traditional design tools and applications, along with focusing on the notion of design as a whole system. Design is not only producing an item or an object but it is a strategic method to facilitate social issues or to produce solutions to feed the true needs of the society. Design can be a catalyst for social change.

The 'Sungai Pinang Kita' Project

In Penang, design thinking has been applied creatively under the project organised by Arts Ed (Community-based Arts and Culture Education) initiated by Ms. Janet Pillai, Ms. Chan Yoke Pin, and supported by a team of enthusiastic volunteers. The need for such programs has become critical in the wake of the current education system where arts education is limited within the classroom setting and is unconnected from local resources and traditional knowledge found in local community and local environment. The program is based on Engaged Arts, where arts education is practiced in the living environment, building on cultural assets or issues in the community.

This 3-years community-based creative arts program started in November 2012. It was carried out in several stages with young residents in a suburban low-income community - Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) Flats, located in Sungai Pinang. What makes the project interesting is the concept and methods used to involve and educate the participants, to help develop their critical and analytical skills on issues and challenges they face within their living environment; empowering them to take charge of the issues by exploring solution using the medium of creative arts.

The project initially worked on identifying the issues felt by the young residents, mainly around management of trash disposal and safety in the play spaces and used performing & visual arts to raise awareness about these issues. In a second phase, the project, with the help of artists, created free workshops to explore few creative art forms to address those issues, mainly dance, video making and sculpture. The last phase, to be conducted this year, will be to further develop the artistic skills of the participants.

The design thinking process here is not a direct constructed process instead it is embedded as parts of the artwork, where the outcome is organic and has opened up other creative opportunities. The outcome is not only the artifacts produced by the children, but also sharper analytical and creative skills that they have gained in the process. Besides the children, the workshops have also contributed to the increased interests of artists and facilitators working in such community based projects. Interim evaluation showed that they see great potential in working with communities, using their technical knowledge to address salient issues.

There are many opportunities for design and arts creative to get involved with projects, which address social issues and encourage thinking about the social needs in Malaysian society.

Design for Social Responsibility

In order to be able to change, designers should rethink about their focus: not only emphasizing on the outcome, but also on the whole process. For that, designers can extend their practice from producing design in the traditional way, creating items such as posters, logos, name cards, banners etc. to the challenging role of being involved in the community. Design can provide ways to facilitate and engage with the society. By playing this role, it will help make the world a better place to live.

With this change, designers have everything to win. Design thinking as a process has already been the practice of designers, They merely need to extend their focus, by enlarging their view, observing and listening to what the society needs and starting the communication. The rewards are guaranteed, seeing the outcome of a work flourish or learning new lessons in the process. As a designer, the call is yours, the responsibility is for all of us, the impact is the world. Think about it...

About the Author

Dr. Zainurul Rahman is a senior lecturer and the Head of Graphic Communication Design at the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia since 2012. Graduated from Swinburne and RMIT University, Melbourne, she has almost 20 years experience as a graphic communication designer and including ten years as a design educator in Australia and Malaysia. Her design practice focuses on identity design, signage system, print and branding. Her experience also includes professional consultancy for several non-profit organizations. In academic, her research interest focus on Malaysian Design History, Malaysian visual national and cultural identity, Design Archive, Popular Print, Malaysian Women Magazine, Cartoon History, Printed Advertisement, and Design Thinking Process.

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