

Design for development

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Abstract

During the past five years I have worked on collaborative, interdisciplinary projects with indigenous community organizations and disciplinary experts in Mexico. Participating in these projects, intended to provide long-term stimulus for economic growth, has altered our approach to projects, our design process, and, as a result added to our methodological and intellectual design toolkit. Using examples and lessons learned from projects, I discuss some of the inclusive, socially responsible, and sustainable philosophies, strategies, and tactics we use – focusing on field research, ethnographic methods, sustainability, and responsible cultural representations to demonstrate how design can be used to foster development.

Keywords

Social design, Sustainability, Social responsibility, Community development, Design research

Introduction

“Design for Development” signifies a shift in the way many designers learn and practice. Our focus is to explore ways we can, as stated by Paul Polak (2008) “design for the other 90%” (p. 64). Agreeing with Polak (2008) that there is a problem when “90 percent of the world’s designers spend all their time working on solutions to the problems of the richest 10 percent of the world’s customers (p. 64), we believe there is both opportunity and obligation to explore how design processes and products can be leveraged for development and the social good. Working under the premise that design plays an important role in fostering economic, cultural, and social development and change, we use design thinking, concepts, methods, processes, and products to engage its power and potential for the social good. This includes our intellectual and creative development as designers as well as that of our partners. We intend for our work to be sustainable and relevant, therefore we work in partnership with communities and subject matter experts. It is through these collaborations that we explore how participatory design research can inform us and lead to meaningful, innovative, and sustainable solutions to

social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems that are identified by people within the communities where we work.

Living and traveling in developing countries (emerging economies) when I was a child fostered an appreciation of cultural diversity and exposed me to dramatic economic and social inequality. I studied political science and worked in international development – an indirect path to design but one that made design seem even more important – it was through this lens that I learned and understood first hand how visual communication and design played integral roles in community education, public health promotion, training... so many things that people were doing within their communities as they worked for positive change. Today, working alongside others and responding to different and shifting constituents and contexts has altered my design practice in very positive ways, adding to our design toolkit, and proven design to be a liberating and empowering activity, as well as product, for everyone. At its core are creativity and innovation that stretches and changes the way we think. Design for Development’s objectives support the education and empowerment of designers, collaborators, and community members – essentially all involved in the project and process. We work to:

1. Develop an amplified worldview in order to work responsibly and effectively at local and global levels;
2. Partner and learn through project experiences;
3. Expand the intellectual foundation and application of design for development and the social good;
4. Exchange design and creative methods with partners to stimulate diverse approaches to creative thinking; and
5. Empower all project participants.

Design for Development formally began during an intensive fieldwork period in the southern Mexican states of Yucatán and Quintana Roo. This area is home to the beautiful Riviera Maya and some of the most renowned archeological sites in Mesoamerica. It is directly tied to another thread of my research which explores the layers of production, distribution, and consumption of the Maya imaginary in this heavily touristed region. This imaginary commodifies the Maya and the natural environment. Understanding lived realities of modern Maya people and the complicated relationship of people in rural towns and villages to the tourism economy is intrinsic to working with marginalized people in this region.

The area where we are working is a place where economy, culture, and environment are so tightly woven and the opportunity to work on so many levels is what makes this area so rewarding for investigation. Several challenges make the case for fieldwork: 1) How does one understand

the economic relation between urban centers, rural towns, and tourism centers?; 2) What capital exists – including skills people possess?; 3) Based on the former, what are possibilities for new business and product development within this context?; 4) What are the obstacles to development and how can these be creatively overcome?; 5) How do we create a new and responsible visual language that does not essentialize or objectify Maya people?; and 6) What are cultural, social, economic values and goals within a community or organization?.

Regardless of where one is from, the social, cultural, and economic complexity of this place – and I will assert most places where we are working with “others,” i.e. people who we have not worked with, research, and who do not mirror ourselves – requires on-the-ground exploration because what we will assume will, in all probability, be wrong because it is what we bring with us from somewhere else. So this process of fieldwork is an excellent way for designers to work more effectively, and it also means we have to be involved at the inception of a project and not simply at the end. In part because our interactions and observations during fieldwork are intrinsic to project development and ideation. This is one of our conditions when entering into a partnership situation and it is a welcome one by all.

Partnerships

From the onset, we refer to people we work with as “partners” and not as “clients.” There are two reasons for this: 1) We frame the project as a learning experience for all involved and are careful to articulate that it is an equal exchange and not charity – thus the expectation is that all sides contribute to the project; and 2) the word “client” may infer that designers are in the service of clients and philosophically we view this as an exchange of non-monetary goods. In fact, we don’t work for partners (or clients) but with – an important distinction. It is only when we are on equal footing that we can all contribute to build a healthy project. All of our projects are in a phase of development and are in the following sectors: Agriculture and food production (honey, orange juice, organic farming, native seed cultivation, and preserves); traditional arts (woodworking, natural medicines); and community development (eco and community tourism, Maya culture education). Details about each project are online at www.design4development.org.

Approaching fieldwork

Our cumulative experiences working in communities indicate that actively incorporating inclusive research methods and activities into our design practice is the most effective way to develop appropriate and sustainable solutions. One of the crucial assumptions we make is that people know what they need and so successful projects address real, and not just speculative, needs of people identified by

the beneficiaries themselves – from within a community. Discussion and dialogue fosters ownership and engagement which, in turn, increases the likelihood of long-term sustainability. Our strategy is to begin each project in the client community in order to establish a dialogue and learn about the context in order, keeping in mind that our primary purpose is to learn the needs of the community rather than simply satisfy our own goals and expectations as designers. Because we are on-site for approximately a week, we pack our days with as many activities as possible and this can be overwhelming. However, it is exactly this rapid immersion that lends itself to discovery and suspension of judgement. This experience relies on our ability to absorb using all our senses, and we document as much as possible for reference. Initially, we build in little time to critically assess our findings so that we can let our experience inform us, acknowledging that we will make space for analytical activities later in the fieldwork process. This is sometimes difficult for designers (and students) who are accustomed to a studio structure: knowing the anticipated outcome, roles, schedule, having order, and having our equipment. Most significant is this, often new, aspect of the design practice that requires active participation in the discovery and definition through direct engagement with the client/partner, community, and context. It is here that we incorporate principles and practices of ethnography into our process – specifically participatory meetings and semi-structured interviews.

We begin by setting up the design problem as a problem yet to be fully or concretely defined and within this, there is acknowledged space for refinement and re-articulation (i.e., we think we know what the problem is based on a description or conversation, but we will approach this in a way that opens up everyone’s opportunities. The subject (for example: organic farming and education, apiculture, native seed preservation and education), combined with the social, cultural, economic, and environmental context, is so complex that working on-site with as many client and subject matter experts as possible is the most pragmatic way to begin to conceptualize the project. In dialogue with project participants, we assess our findings and define the project. Since findings are specific to projects, I provide selected observations from my notes about two projects: 1) Xyaat ecotourism cooperative, a community-based initiative where visitors can learn about daily life and practices, natural medicine, contemporary history, crafts, and the environment; and 2) Hach Kaab Honey, an initiative of four cooperatives to bring their quality honey to market under one brand identity and earn a fair market price for their product.

Xyaat ecotourism cooperative: concern about distinguishing themselves as an organization that is community-based and not tourism from outside the community; want to be represented as modern Maya; percentage of profits fund educational and

environmental programs; employs community members on a rotating basis; rise in town inhabitants working in all-inclusive resorts; many view the service industry in the Maya Riviera as the only source of stable income; discrimination of Maya people in the tourism sector; a rich history tied to the Caste War; engagement with the land and environment and actions being taken for preservation and responsible development and farming; new cooperative farming initiatives; development of a network of community tourism groups; wanting to educate everyone about traditional medicine, contemporary history, and language; and desire to remain small, manageable, and responsible to the community.

Hach Kaab honey: concern that they don't understand the market but willingness to try; ancient Maya gods have no relevance to them today – so to use this in any aspect of identity does not connect with them; local political issues enter into their ability to get government support; the process is much more complex than initially thought given the expansion from one cooperative to four.

Fieldwork provides the opportunity to observe and participate in dynamics and processes in context, ask questions, establish dialogue, and build a frame of reference for project work. In terms of cost, time, and overall benefit to the project, I consider it the single most effective way to begin a project because it is such a rapid learning environment. Granted that the fieldwork itself must be structured and ours is packed full of diverse activities with partners. More than just learning about what we consider to be the subject matter of the project (for example, how to sell honey), we learn about the product's production process (for example, the process of beekeeping), and spend time at social gatherings and meals with partners, their families, and the community. This immersion allows us to make disparate connections and view the project holistically.

This fieldwork phase has social benefits as well. Our partners say that our willingness to listen and learn from them – in the case of the honey project something they did not expect – was fundamental to establishing trust and dialogue that resulted in elegant, appropriate, and responsible solutions. A serious approach to projects increased their confidence in its success and motivation to move forward. Interviews and discussions initiated by us become a group effort, leading to further ideation and opening up possibilities that would not have surfaced otherwise. Creative processes such as brainstorming and sketching are transferable skills and appropriated in ways that work within community contexts. Articulating and critically considering macro and micro project issues allows a group to collectively establish a dialogue, buy-in, and further focus on their strategy. There is no substitute for direct involvement and "being there" because it was in these personal interactions that we built deeper, more meaningful relationships.

For designers, ethnographic research/fieldwork provides the opportunity to learn first-hand about culture, context and communication. We set up information sessions and conducted semi-structured interviews, and were careful not to analyze and evaluate people and situations. It was only through these on the ground activities that we

could begin to unravel the real vs. perceived obstacles to development by experiencing lived realities. This includes learning about many different experiences and practices, including what it's like for a family to live on less than \$5 a day. This work requires and builds empathy – understanding the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others.

The subsequent design and production phases may occur anywhere but we maintain a continuous communication flow that generates dialogue and negotiation as we develop the project. An unexpected outcome that has now become a pattern is how the resulting design product contributes to empowerment, pride, and provides motivation to continue the process. The product, in this context, is often instrumental in having others, including government officials, take the work of community organizations seriously and demonstrates their ability to bring their product to market. Working in indigenous Maya communities allows us to observe that there is tension in the tourist representation of ancient Maya as people unchanged over time just as there continues to be a struggle to overcome their ethnic subordination and reclaim their identity as modern Maya people, who are – as the mural in Carrillo Puerto states – "a community on the move," with roots in the region, in the land. Our findings have helped us work towards a more socially responsible representation of Maya culture that moves beyond simplistic stereotypes. We do capitalize on Maya language, not as a device to capitalize on ancient culture, but because it is the primary language spoken in the communities where we work and is intrinsic to Maya identity. Product naming, language use, the development of a visual language – the brand identity – is a collaborative and participatory process and this both empowers and speaks to the agency of the partners we work with. Through our collaborative project work we dissect the Maya imaginary and simultaneously work to create alternative and responsible representations of contemporary Maya culture.

Ultimately, it is this process of fieldwork that aids in developing long-term, responsible, and appropriate solutions that empower all participants as we engage design for development. The value of our work is greater than the products we produce – it is the collaboration, exchange, and learning that is embedded in each experience and the possibilities which emerge.

Endnote

Polak, P. (2008). *Out of Poverty: What works when traditional approaches fail*. San Francisco, Berrett Koehler.