

Designing Participation

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Introduction

Native tribes all over the world tell the story about a special grandmother that all of us share. Grandmother Spider spends her days weaving a living web that connects all physical life. Through our grandma's living creation all living beings are interconnected, with each and every one of us, and all other creatures functioning as a vital and integral strand in this Web.

I like to view the role we hold as designers in the scope of sustainability as offsprings of this celebrated weaver, invited to use our creative potential to identify unraveled or entangled strands of this web and explore how to re-connect them in fresh and healing ways.

As designers we have the unique capacity to envision, illustrate and enable the realization of new and inviting life habits that can thoroughly reform the encounter between man, object and environment. Nowadays we also have a role of mediation – to support the rehabilitation of the developed world inhabitants from the destructive lifestyles we have embraced for only a few decades.

This mediation process includes creating fresh and creative alternatives to this lifestyle which offer not only social and environmental benefits but also illustrate appealing, sensual, experiential and inspirational concepts, products, services and systems.

This paper is the tale of a journey towards design that comes from a deep sense of participation, a path towards exploring the service a great-grand daughter of a weaver in the area of sustainability design. It shares the exploration through my own work as a designer and through working with groups of design students in the last seven years.

The paper will focus on four study case two of them from the author's design work and two are workshops facilitated by the author.

The Way Back..

To be honest, until maybe three years ago I actually hated introducing myself as a designer. I had these peculiar bodily sensation every time I had to take part in conversation that will make me use the D word..

At the time I was already working only in the field of sustainability design and yet I couldn't find ease from this void eating me up from within. I was already a design teacher at the time so it truly felt like I was living in a split personality.

It took me time to realize that the source of the aversion I was feeling was the fact that as a designer I was trained to be "The one who knows" – The one who is expected to come with the answers and would know the solution to a challenge. But in a field that is SO subjective and swamped with invariables I just couldn't continue to pretend..

Slowly I started peeling off this costume and surrendered to the role of the one that "does NOT know"

Naked from the burden of knowing I could start to deeply question everything around me. Allowing myself to ask funny and peculiar questions that open up an opportunity for looking at the world with unique glasses; Agreeing to view the world in new eyes, through fresh stories.

Approaching a design challenge with the humility of "being the one that does not know" invites us to act as a curious learner allowing not only people but also a given environment, its heritage and its material and immaterial knowledge to guide us towards the possible solutions. The role of "not knowing" is an active one – choosing every moment again to look beyond one's assumptions and one's understanding of the way things are and/or should be and actively choosing to view a challenge through the glasses of potential, the glasses of new possibilities.

With this process I found that both the way I develop my own projects and the way I facilitate sustainable design workshops completely changed. Naked from the burden of knowing I could start to truly discover listening, and to guide the workshop participants to go through a deep process of questioning that could open them to a deeper process. Allowing our creative listening to guide us towards a worthwhile expression of the creative potential we were given.

Study Cases | Author's work

Study Case 1: WindyLight – Street Lights Operated by Wind Energy

If we assume that as designers we have the unique capacity to envision and enable the realization of new and inviting life habits that can thoroughly reform the encounter between man, object and environment, a first good step to do so is to find a tool that will enable us to look at the reality around us with a fresh view that will enable us to identify routes of potential.

If we focus on the city, and the potential of products to create *a direct link* between the energy that surrounds us and our basic everyday human needs, some questions come to mind:

Questions like: How can we listen to the light of the moon? Can walking in the city feel as charging as walking in a forest? When does a product become another link in the chain of natural phenomena?

As a next step we can choose to wear our metaphorical custom-crafted glasses of potential looking for interesting sources of abundance that we tend to over-look. Soft gusts of wind prevalent in the urban environment can be easily identified as one of them.

We are so used to tuning in to the energy of wind with big solutions, on a large scale away from the city. But in the cities where most of humanity lives and consumes energy the wind is usually soft and subtle.

And again the questions: how can we weave these two together? How can we connect this softer wind to answer an everyday immediate need?

This is how WindyLight came into life.

WindyLight is a collection of self-sufficient outdoor lights that perform on free, clean energy while creating a unique and sensual illuminating experience. It is designed to utilize soft gusts of wind and to provide light even in urban environments.

Ofcourse it is not a trivial thing for a designer to start connecting with the wind, so the first step was to get more deeply acquainted with this fascinating phenomena, and I established a wind monitoring station on the rooftop of my residential building in Tel Aviv.

I thought it would be simple – we all sense the wind all our lives and yet I never realized how playful and dramatic it would be. In an instance it would move from 22 to 0 km/min and than 5, 67, 9, 0 again. I became addicted to sitting in front of the monitor – devastated with every 0 and celebrating everything above 10 km/min..

Developing the WindyWheel model became the center of my actions this is the one repetitive module that integrates wind collection and an LED light source and transforms wind to electrical current. Its R&D process includes an aerodynamic empiric study and product engineering. The R&D of this one element allows the creation of a variety of lighting solutions for both private and public sectors.

Many of our tests are done on this self-developed mobile device. We ride a bicycle to create wind-tunnel-like settings that allow us to asses and navigate our progress. Nowadays we created a wind tunnel to speed up the process.

WindyLight is designed to be an ambassador of the potential of our designed objects weaving those links between the renewables around us and our everyday human needs. Touching the way products might create *a direct link* between the energy that surrounds us and our basic everyday human needs.

WindyLight is here to support us in imagining the cities of today as part of this interwoven connected living web.. As part of this web human actions are nurtured by the renewable resources and materials surrounding them. This living system creates a whole new experience of nourishment from the environment and of nourishing it back through our actions.

Instead of assuming that every building is connected to the electrical grid we would ask What's your building's favorite nourishment? Wind? Compost? Rain? Dew? All of the above?

Instead of measuring How much fuel we use when we move from a to b, we would measure how Many Watts we actually produce from walking, running playing in the city..

Living cities that reacts to the life that is in it people, animals, energy, renewable resources etc.



figure 1



figure 2

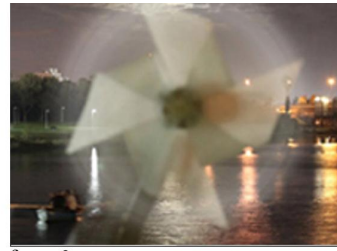


figure 3

StudyCase 2 – Back to Earth

These are some questions I asked to start my next project: Which paradise accepts ice-cream spoons? How many times does an average T reincarnate? Can products, like people, come from Dust, and to Dust you shall return?

Embracing the role of a Spiderwoman I also wonder around looking for new possibilities, new sources of abundance, new links to tie.. I noticed the phenomenon of man-made mountains - In my country, piles of dug-out earth that are thrown away by constructors can be found in the middle of many natural reserves.

Many uses of mud are known through history, but one of the most unique examples is the traditional Indian chai clay cup. It is made from clay dried in the sun and after it is used it is thrown to the ground blending back within minutes to become earth again. When I first saw it in real life I knew that all I ever learned about sustainable design turned pale in front of this ingenious design.

So, can products, like people, come from Dust, and to Dust shall return?

I started working with the piled thrown-away earth I found in different places and at the same time researching ancient techniques of building with soil and creating products that were prevalent in the middle east in ancient times.

Through the collection of material I read about I found myself becoming a designer-gatherer (play of words with the term hunter-gatherer), exploring ancient techniques mixing them with modern ones and coming up with old-new materials that touch upon a future of truly organic products that can be produced everywhere easily using local soil and agricultural residue. Towards an old-new future of 100% organic 100% healing in making 100% local products combining ancient techniques with contemporary production methods.

With this project I touch upon a vision in which DIY shops rent-out molds for us to produce our products in an average kitchen from what we can find in our environment, providing the necessary recipes of-course.. And when we are done with our product we can break it down and melt it back to mold it again into a new form and function.



figure 4

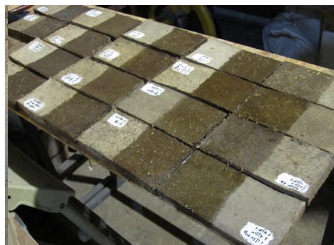


figure 5



figure 6

Study Cases | Workshops facilitated by Author

With the same perception of design and sustainability design processes I also facilitate design workshops. I will share in this paper two workshops. The first was in Mexico in 2010 and the second in Spain in 2011.

Study Case 3 – Mayan Workshop

Overview

In the winter of 2010, I was invited to facilitate the 'Mayan Design Workshop' initiated by Unam University in Mexico city. During this workshop for one week design students work in collaboration of Mexican artisans from the Mayan area to support the design of objects that can be produced and sold by the artisans.

The group I facilitated consisted of 10 young students and we work with a small group of women that recently established a wood-working workshop with the hope to generate additional income for their families by selling products to tourists.

Process

The first step of the process was to get acquainted with the women, the village, the local heritage and the surrounding environment.

In the second step we defined together all the questions we felt were at the source of our expected design intervention and based on that the designers were asked to wear their unique metaphorical glasses of potential and to identify together what was the real added value we can bring as designers to this community.

Based on this process we defined together the project's founding principles:

1. Our products will put emphasis on communicating the artisans identity through them, support communicate their story to the world.
2. Empowering the culture while supporting the generation of income.
3. products that are meaningful for the community and can be used by it.
4. Attractive products for tourists both visually and in size and weight.
5. Making wise use of existing resources.
6. Society + ecologically responsible + economically viable.
7. Creating a unique visual language for the community.
8. Products will be suitable for production by "professional-amateur" artisans.
9. Define a starting point for a long-term process.

Conclusions

The result of this process was a series of games based on an existing local game that will use the different characters of the local mythology.

All the games are based on a very simple shape of wood that can be made from left over materials of the local carpentries. In this way we can avoid the need of the community to cut-down the forest for their income.

The game can be produced by amateur artisans and can involve the whole family in weaving the creatures together.

Approaching this process as curious learners exploring what is the real added value design can bring into this situation, allowing the unique knowledge and characteristics of the place, the community and their goals to be our compass and honestly raising the deepest and at times the most uncomfortable questions allowed us to come up with a result that deeply addressed both social and environmental challenges we were faced with during this process.



figure 7



figure 8



figure 9

Study Case 4 – Gorbeialdea Basque Country

Overview

In the summer of 2011 I was invited by Creativity Zentrum Bilbao to guide a design workshop in a natural park in Spain named Gorbeialdea. The challenge was to create a concept for sustainable outdoor experiences and furniture in this magnificent wild-green park.

The group consisted of 10 young designers and our hosts defined two areas in which we were asked to come up with sustainable design concepts. The first was creating a recreation area near the park's natural lake and the second was a concept for a guest house and restaurant for mountain climbers.

On the first day of the workshop our hosts took us on a guided tour through the park. although I was the workshop facilitator, I was not planning to say anything that day since I was the only non-local and knew the least about the park than anyone else.

When we stopped for a discussion a classical designer-client conversation began to form between the workshop participants and our hosts – the park rangers. “But we don’t understand what do you expect of us” the designers said.

At that point I had to intervene and said “we came here today to listen to the park. It will tell us what it needs. Just hold to the quality of listening and ask yourselves what is the real added value we can bring to this place as designers”

The next day in the local news paper: “Adital Ela sustainable design guru from Israel told us to listen to the park”. Seeing this statement outside of the context of our conversation might sound funny, but as we held this quality through the days of the workshop very significant processes started happening as described below.

Process

The first step of the process was asking many open questions:

- What can be the added value design can bring to such a magnificent and wild park?
- How can we let the park show us the way towards a sustainable design intervention?
- How can this process serve the organization and also the different communities that are connected to the park?
- How can design create an invitation for people that normally don’t visit the park to experience it in a new and connected way?

- How can we approach the design process from a sense of deep participation with the environment, the people, the heritage and the local knowledge?

Throughout the process we made sure to get as deeply acquainted as possible with the uniqueness of the park, with the local heritage, with the history, the mythology, the local knowledge and the typical crafts.

During the workshop we spent many of our design and brainstorming sessions on location to make sure our suggestions are as in-tuned as possible with the existing environment. We took our meals, for instance in the exact location of the restaurant and created a brainstorming session about our restaurant's experience throughout the meal.

We identified on location materials, morphologies, experiences and technologies that we felt would be the most appropriate to apply through our design proposals.

The questions we raised at the beginning of the design process became our guiding principles towards our design processes.

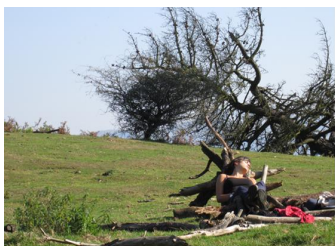


figure 10

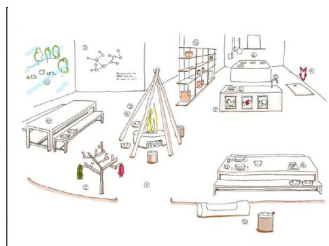


figure 11



figure 12

Conclusions

- Our 5 days design process around this huge, rich and extremely vivid park were an invitation for a design research process. We approached it as an invitation to raise questions and identify potentials and not as a way to give final answers.
- In this workshop we all understood very quickly we have to approach this design challenge very humble – come and listen, come and sense and take a moment to open ourselves to this richness before we raise our designer's thoughts pencils.
- This workshop was also an invitation for the local community to come and dream together. The results of our work is a starting point that can enable a participatory process that will invite the local community to come and think together how they would like to experience the park in the two specific locations in which we focused. Design proposals can help people dream. Our proposals are an invitation for dialogue – inviting people to look beyond their fear from insensitive interventions and to experience the potentials that hide in enriching and nourishing proposals.
- As one can see through the results the fact we raised deep questions and kept them as our code of ethics enabled the design proposals manifest a deep motivation for them to become an extension of the natural environment and the local materials and technologies, the human richness and the local heritage and customs.
- One of the fascination aspects of the proposals was the way the designers explored ways for the design proposal to be nourishing and enriching to the local community. Inviting the local communities to be active participants in creating the experience in the restaurant and lodge.

Conclusion

One of the important tasks of our time, I find, is listening to lost stories. Whether they are the ones we hid deep within us many years ago, the ones our ancestors left for us but we

never really bothered listening, or the hidden unknown new links between our basic needs and the environment that surrounds us and our here for us to discover.

Through a three phase process of: 1) asking funny and peculiar questions, 2) wearing the metaphorical glasses of potential and 3) defining the founding principles to approach a design process from a deep sense of participation, we can support creative and surprising design processes that can support guiding designers and students towards deeper and more innovative sustainable design solutions.

These processes can support us moving forward to finding our common story as a group, as a society, as a humanity. Weaving our way back into the web of participation.

We are invited to use our inherited skills as creative weavers to weave new links between members of a community and their common wishes and goals, between indigenous knowledge and cutting edge technology, between natural phenomena and basic human needs.

About the author

Adital Ela Adital is a designer specializing in the field of design for sustainability. She has a BA in product design from HIT- Holon Academic Institute of Technology in Israel and a Masters of Design from the "Man and Humanity" masters program at the Design Academy Eindhoven.

She is the founder and CEO of "S-SENSE DESIGN", a sustainable design studio, and teaches sustainable design at the social-environmental design study program at HIT, Israel. She regularly lectures at conferences and leads sustainability design workshops around the world. Adital is a TEDfellow.