AGEING AS DESIGN CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses emerging themes related to *design culture of ageing* or in other words *ageing as design culture*. By looking into existing experiment and exploration practices from different countries on ageing and design, this paper summarizes outcomes from a full day international expert's workshop. The main outcome is a need for a broader understanding of ageing that goes beyond the definition of ageing by means of age, deficits and needs. We introduce four main issues that emerged from our discussions in our workshop on how to deal with ageing as a subject of design experiments. These four themes can be considered as initial steps for building a framework for design culture of ageing. A theoretical framework of design and ageing could help designers to better understand the dynamic interrelations and different states of ageing. This discussion further can open up new creative spaces related to ageing as design culture.

INTRODUCTION

With the demographic change, ageing has been a topic of interest for various disciplines in the last decade. Various models point to different perspectives on ageing studies. Among others, designers were also involved in ageing related design works. The interdisciplinary tradition of "designing for ageing society" starts from late 80's with work on tele-medicine. In recent years with the introduction of assistive design to the area, it gained more emphasis. We concentrate on interdisciplinary framing of design theoretical perspectives on ageing and design. "Design culture of ageing" or in other words "Ageing as design culture" is the output of some years of practical work on the area. We looked into existing experiment and exploration practices from different countries on ageing and design based on self-reporting of the individuals involved in collaborative projects. The main outcome here is to point to a broader understanding of ageing (from a design perspective) that goes beyond the definition of ageing by means of age, deficits and needs. In this short paper we introduce four main issues that emerged from our discussions in an experts' workshop on how to deal with ageing as a subject of design experiments. We introduce these four themes as initial steps for building a framework for design culture of ageing. A theoretical framework of design and ageing could help designers to better understand their standing and its relations to other disciplines in relation to ageing). This discussion further can open up new creative spaces based on design-led approaches related to ageing as design culture.

LITERATURE AND THEORY

More than a decade designers were part of projects on ageing and design (e.g.: designing for ageing well). Until recently, the strong focus of such design explorations on ageing was on technology and service design. As an example European Commission funded program of Ambient Assisted Living (AAL) (Anon. 2012) includes more than hundred collaborative design and technology projects on ageing and design. In a closer look, most of these projects follow a "problem oriented" approach based on biological age definition, e.g.: see a recent report from European Commission (European Commission – DG ECFIN. 2012). There are actually many design research examples that indicate to parallel issues and offer solutions (e.g.: Scandinavian participatory design approach and design techniques or work of Helen Hamlyn Center, Age and Ability Research Lab). Design plays a role on almost every project from well-known problem solving oriented assistive design models to successful inclusive design examples. Our aim is to discuss some of the important points from existing examples in order to define most important themes for a design perspective on ageing.

Critical gerontology defines the process of *ageing successfully* as being the end product and *the*

normatively desirable state (Holstein and Minkler 2003). They point to possible harms of this understanding to older people (ibid.). In their critique to this approach they define a "needed complexity in thinking about the relationships among individual biography, social and cultural norms, and public policy" (ibid.). Essen and Östlund (2011) discuss the potentials of such a complexity for design and innovation. They point to the importance of a broader understanding of ageing that is beyond definitions of biological age (ibid.). One way of dealing with this for designers would be looking into situations. Situated understanding of elderliness (Brandt et al, 2010) is an approach that aims to go beyond the stigmatizing understanding on ageing. '*Situated elderliness*' as a notion aims to define ageing and old age not with biological age, nor with institutional categories, but rather by looking into everyday practices (Brandt et al, 2010). If we try to understand particular situations that make people "feel old", we can also set dynamic design explorations for non-stigmatizing design solutions. But how?

Ageing is not an easy domain for designers. Everyday of an "ageing" person is not just out there in full detail. However, there are numerous communities with whom designers can collaborate. By looking into everyday practices of established communities, it is possible for a designer to gain some insight to particular issues. Borrowing from Lave and Wenger's notion of *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991), this approach is called *communities of everyday practice*, and it aims helping designers to use "elderly's existing everyday practices as frame and starting point" (Brandt et al, 2010).

We introduced couple of strategies for designers to deal with the complexity of ageing as a design exploration area. The introduced topics above are not new. However, until now the relations of situated elderliness, broader needs for definitions and further aspects of design and ageing have not yet been theoretically related to each other for design. The relations of innovation research theory and practice (Essen and Östlund 2011, Kohlbacher and Herstatt 2011) to ageing, everyday routines of ageing people, aesthetic and design choices are all interesting questions that can relate to our introduced work. Roles of "diversity", "heterogeneity" and "abilities" are the core themes, based on an ability-based understanding of aging (Wobbrock et al 2011) and situated elderliness (Brandt et al 2010) for future research on the topic. A discussion of the relations and meanings of such issues to design and to each other can help us set up a new design perspective on the issue. For design, we call our early understanding "*ageing as design culture/design culture of ageing*".

METHOD AND EVALUATION

This paper is based on the experts' discussion from an international design workshop on ageing, namely "Elderly's Everyday Practices as a Design Approach".

The workshop was held as a part of the NordiCHI 2012 Conference, Copenhagen. The call for papers to this workshop was distributed through well-known digital channels, such as email lists with more than 2000 members. As a result 8 papers were accepted from 6 different countries (Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Finland Hong Kong, and UK). The participants were from different fields with a common interest on "designing and elderly". Examples of different disciplines involved in this workshop are: Design, design sciences, human computer interaction, inclusive design, occupational therapy, rehabilitation engineering. All the participants had collaborative research, experiments and explorations practice, and all workshop participants worked together with elderly in everyday situations.

The full day workshop was divided into three parts. In a first round participants gave examples to their practices from design and elderly, introduced their experiment and exploration strategies and findings. Here is the short summary from position papers:

Eva Eriksson discussed results from an EC funded project on established practices of design communication with vulnerable generations, children and elderly. The main consideration of this paper was on modernizing and developing educational programs. *Marie Ertner* introduced representations of elderly and current approach of fragmenting them into countless sub categories. She gave concrete examples from the field about the complexity on how the elderly is performed. *Özge Subasi* gave examples from EC-AAL funded Stimulate Project on lack of clear guidelines that support communication between designers and older people. She introduced a co-creation tool for capturing design inspirations. *Thomas Binder* and *Lone Malmborg* introduced their previous work on everyday practices of older people, notion of communities. The importance of communities and fieldwork were discussed. *Paul Sugarhood* introduced the ATHENE (Assistive Technologies for Healthy Living in Elders: Needs Assessment by Ethnography) project and gave examples to challenges and most important barriers (physical, sensory and psychological) for involving people in the design process. *Susanne Frennert* talked about the adoption of robots by older adults. By concentrating on social meanings of robots in the life of old adults, her paper looked into possible future everyday practices of senior's homes and robots. *Kirsikka Vaajakallio* introduced a case study from the city of Kauniainen on how design students rethink the future of senior services in a co-design process. *Yanki Lee* introduced examples from a study with a community of 6,000 retired academics living on campus of Tsinghua University, Beijing. She discussed the shift of mindset to design for the ingenuity of ageing. *Britt Östlund* discussed the new potentials that are brought by older people and presented a way on how we can conceptualize modern ageing by making use of theories and concepts from technology studies in social science.

During this part of workshop, several overlaps were detected across the fields and from different countries. In the end of first round several questions indicated similar issues. Examples to questions that were mentioned more than one were on:

- How can we define and protect a respectful language both for academy and daily conversation on the issue?

- How can we bring deep insights from the field to the design space? (language, equal participation, democracy)

- What are the potentials of "being old" for creative space? (older people as innovators, urban participation, …)

- What kind of tools, infrastructures are needed for educating better designer generations for this particular topic? (design education)

- How can design and technology be better integrated to real life issues of particular ageing situations? (bottom up, communities, everyday).

Second round was set as a discussion platform for defining strategies for dealing with given problems and issues. Here these questions were discussed and categorized into four working themes (with further sub-themes).

In a third round an overriding theme of "ageing as culture" was further discussed as an umbrella term for the topic. A general view on ageing and design has been created for future research and experimentation agenda based on this discussion

RESULTS

As a result of the workshop, four working themes are defined based on individual's (cross cultural) practices in collaborative work with elderly. These are:

- Definition of "notion of elderly"
- Situated Elderliness
- Communities of Practices
- Role of the designer

In the last round "aging as design culture" has been defined as overriding theme and the relations of these four themes to "ageing as design culture" has been discussed. Here is a short overview of the four themes:

Definition of "notion of elderly": Today's experimentation and exploration practices have a wide variety of definitions on the elderly. Most of these definitions unfortunately are based on practical categories, driven from technical experiments. They are top down sets of categories (e.g.: age based user groups). Here, it is important to develop a language and set of definitions that are dynamically related to each other but that avoid a generalisation and "otherisation" of "elderly" as a specific group. Topics like: Bottom up research on ageing notion, insights from the field,

defining heterogeneity in "ageing well" would all belong to this theme.

Situated Elderliness: Situated elderliness is a new paradigm that aim to point situational aspects of environments, objects and changes in life courses that might affect the perception of the self as "elderly" or "not". This dynamic understanding can help us to define particular situations, services… etc. as more important to consider in particular. This theme includes specific problems related to ageing. Situated elderliness such as practices of "feeling old" vs. "being old", case studies and examples of real-world seniors' related to new future technology design solutions and their expected results, broader understanding of access and exclusion can all belong to this theme.

Communities of Everyday Practices: Communities of everyday practices is another important theme that can help us collect and relate practices of seniors in their local environments and daily settings. This theme here is selected for understanding practices of a group with similar interests independent from their age or deficiencies. This approach helps us explore more broadly and better grounded to real life situations. Looking into community based practices in relation to ageing (senior associations, clubs) in local settings, finding new models for developing relations with local communities can all belong to this theme.

Role of the designer: Lastly, in this process the designer and design researcher have multiple roles that are to be defined as a part of the process. This theme therefore includes both the practices of design (e.g.: ethics, user vs. vision driven) and possible pitfalls and further design research paradigms (e.g.: co design, emphatic design). Considerations such as broader understanding of ethics, including design ethics, giving-back mechanisms, visual language and sustainable processes, considerations in arts and design education can be discussed under this theme. This theme can further include issues such as defining relevant design process for supporting continuous involvement of senior participants, exploring life experiences as sources of innovations or creative space of life-span changes.

The workshop identified and discussed four emerging themes related to ageing and design explorations. In the third round an umbrella theme was created, namely "*ageing as design culture*".

Ageing as design culture as overriding theme aims to define a sustainable design space for ageing related issues. It is the mutual production of both parties involved and it is the sum of the dynamic relations that are explained above. Ageing as design culture avoids categorising people by age or deficits, but consider possible constraints of environments or changes in the life course in the design process. It further is based on a bottom up understanding of the notion of elderly and is

bounded with everyday practices shaping senior communities. The role of the designer here is to build the related infrastructure that allows future collaborations with communities. The designer is responsible for creating the best democratic communications, reflect and sustain her practices in close collaboration with existing communities of practices.

DISCUSSION

This paper focused on the existing practices in design experiments on ageing and design. The introduced themes and the conclusion on "ageing as design culture" aim to define a dynamic design space for the future of ageing related design explorations and experiments.
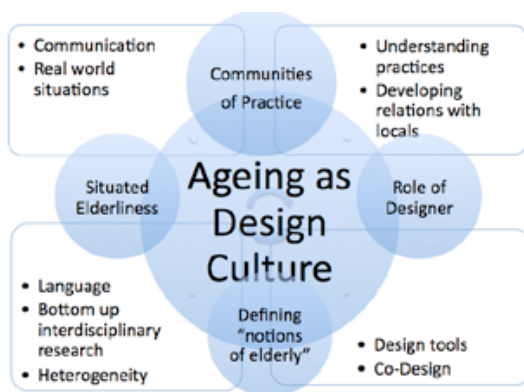

Figure 1: Sphere of "Ageing as Design Culture"

Ageing and its relations to design is a complex sphere of mutual relations (Figure 1). It is important to give equal emphasis on those relations in order to succeed in this specific area of design explorations. As summarized in Figure 1, the interrelations between four themes can offer us numerous ways of looking into this rich topic.

To exemplify Figure 1, let's imagine a scenario of a young designer, named Lucy. Lucy wants to design a new product on ageing & design. She can use her existing skills such as creating co-design concepts together with local seniors (role of designer) for researching a particular notion (notions of elderly). Here, she can benefit from existing communities and years of everyday practices from these people (communities of everyday practice) via observing them and working with them. It might be important for her to consider, planning and building sustainable ways of working together with communities, using a proper language and communication materials. She can define and work out particular situations that she detected during her research in ageing area (e.g: Situated

Elderliness) via usage of specific creative techniques. By this way, she would not only produce a new idea but also establish sustainable design process. We call this approach *Ageing as Design Culture/ Design Culture of Ageing*.

With this point of view, our goal is to go beyond a disability-support assistive lens or a one-size fits all inclusive design solution. On this paper we aimed to explore an initial framework for design and ageing to search the interrelations of existing perspectives and their relations to design explorations.

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