

DESIGN FOR, MEANING MAKING AND SHARING

DR. NANCI TAKEYAMA

NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY,
SINGAPORE

NTAKEYAMA@NTU.EDU.SG

ABSTRACT



The aim of this exhibition is to show case the work of the group *design for*, a non-profit organization, funded by Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. *design for* is an open platform for collaborations on social design projects.

design for advocates cultural understanding and heritage preservation by using design as a dialogue. The role of the designer is of a facilitator, between the traditional crafts and wider global audience. Through the crafts and the products designed collaboratively with communities the designer act as a storyteller of heritage and culture.

INTRODUCTION

Laos was chosen as research site for it's unique relationship with the material culture, as it has one of the most intricate textiles in the region. The textile in Laos employs motifs and patterns that are still strongly

connected to their own spirituality, daily rites and rituals. Traditional Laos cotton and silk textiles are produced through hand dye techniques, using natural pigments from plants and minerals, the threads are hand spun and hand woven.

As Singapore is today a highly developed country, a state city that is densely urbanized, by bringing Singaporean students who to dwell with these communities in Laos, enabled them to learn about a different way to life based on handmade artefacts, self grown vegetables, fruits, home cooked foods and community living values. In return our group aimed to co-design and design products with the feedback of the artisans themselves, through participatory design workshops. By refining the finishing of the crafts, our goals was to re-position the value of their traditional craft, as premium, one of a kind product, as opposed to ordinary machine made and mass-produced. We believe this mentality needs to start from inside out, where the artisans are proud of their own skills and workmanship. For that we are currently setting up a social business to produce limited editions of products to fund workshops to build on the artisans' capabilities. In the long run, this would enable the artisans to work less, remain in their communities, not look for jobs in the cities, continue to practice craft techniques that date back to pre-industrial revolution, package the ritual of making as a premium, value added to the product. The research in Laos began with ethnographic documentation of its visual culture. In order to understand and re-interpret the living culture in the present day Laotian communities, focusing on its most important symbol, the Cosmic Serpent. Our process is documented and presented in this exhibition proposal that hopes to present and revive the relevance of the Cosmic Serpent, our process from understand the culture, co-create culturally respectful products, and the hands behind them.

For more information: www.designfor.co

THE MODEL – MEANING, MAKING, SHARING

The concept of ‘design for’ takes after models of Asian apprenticeships, based on the methods of traditional craftsmanship. By visiting craft villages and learning from the original artisans themselves, we understand their philosophy to life, learn from their techniques and derive a wealth of knowledge that is slowly being forgotten today. This translates to a model of research into meaning, design by making, and embracing human relationships through sharing.



RESEARCH (MEANING)

Ethnographic research allows us to see in the material culture the worldview of a particular cultural group of people. From ethnographic research, we learn and understand the meanings of visual forms and symbols relevant to this worldview. The cultural and visual investigation on the Cosmic Serpent in Laos as a symbol has been chosen as an entry point to the project.

DESIGN (MAKING)

To learn by making, is to understand methods and materials in the process of traditional craft making. We design products that recognize and respect the importance of the culture and the materials, together with the artisans themselves.

COMMUNITY (SHARING)

By providing our collaborators with designs, we hope to support the economies of local communities while advocating to the values of ethical consumerism. We worked with non-profit organizations from the region to ensure fair trade for artisans; placing importance to the well being of communities.

In November 2012, we returned to Vientiane in Laos to conduct a workshop on the meaning of the motif we investigated, the cosmic serpent. The workshop was given in conjunction to a Laotian anthropologist, textile expert. The workshop participants were very interested to learn the stories or meanings behind the motifs as many of them have been lost in the last decades. A workbook was created with plenty of visuals references so that participants could cut and paste images, recall and recount stories. In November 2013 we received a UNESCO honorable commendation for this project.

In Feb 2014 we had an exhibition at the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore, the exhibition was opened by Lao Prime Minister and his Singaporean host, in his visit for the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries. For this exhibition, we were able to bring some weavers to Singapore and for us this was the highlight of this exhibition as they were able to proudly represent their country through their skills. During the same period we organized a symposium on the meaning of the cosmic serpent in Asia with presentation featuring this symbol in Southeast Asia, China and cross cultures.

CONCLUSION

Design for is not interested in designing objects for aesthetical purposes, instead, we uses the object as an entry point to the dialogue. By deconstructing the many layers of meanings within these objects our purpose is to tell the stories on the heritage, the material culture, the techniques and finally it’s people.

REFERENCES

- Borges, A., 2011. *Design + craft: The Brazilian path*. São Paulo: Editora Terceiro Nome
- Brown, T. 2009. *Design for change*. New York: Harper Business.
- Designers meet artisans, a practical guide. 2005. UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001471/147132eo.pdf>. (accessed in August 2012)
- Papanek, Victor J. 1985. *Design for the real world: Human ecology and social change*. London: Thames & Hudson.