



Social Design as a Creative Device in Developing Countries: *The Case of a Handcraft Pottery Community in Cambodia*

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This article presents social design as an alternative to designerly approaches in developing countries, based on a field study conducted to improve the ceramic production and trade of a handcraft community in Cambodia. The study points out that existing interventions tend to impose modernist approaches with technological fixes and have attitudes which reflect cultural imperialism, often resulting in weak continuity and the production of inequalities. Instead, the study demonstrates the ways in which social design practice can respond to the challenges of complex social problems, and to the discontinuity and cultural barriers that are often faced in the development context. Based on Latour's notion of the social (2005), social design and social designers might be used to reconfigure and create better social-cultural-technical relations, thereby constructing sustainable social infrastructures grounded in local participation and indigenous knowledge. The fieldwork reported in this paper illustrates the narrative process of a participatory action research based Social Design Workshop, which highlights the significance of the problematisation process that revealed kilns as troubling actors, and devised inventive approaches for capacity building. The research suggests that successful social design practices are based on the notion of situatedness and the agency of designers as catalysts, which results in the creation of mutual relationships between the people, the community, the sociocultural context, technology, and artefacts, which together encourage sustainable development.

Keywords – Action Research, Actor-Network Theory, Developing Countries, Handcraft Community, Social Design.

Relevance to Design Practice – Based on a field study in a Cambodian handcraft community, this study provides both critical and practical approaches for designers and development practitioners who intend to work on cultural projects in developing countries.

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Introduction

In 2010, it was widely publicised that a Korean construction conglomerate had donated 3,000 pianos to be distributed to rural schools across Cambodia. This was lauded as a prodigious contribution to places which lacked arts and creativity programmes in public education. This made a warm-hearted yet plain story. Before long however, it turned out that the donated pianos were digital instruments, which meant that the majority of them could not be used because—not surprisingly—schools in rural area did not have access to electricity. The story has been spread among volunteer workers in Cambodia as a rather funny joke. Yet, the donation continues to be publicised repetitively as a generous contribution to Cambodia (Kim, 2012).

It might be uncomfortable to admit, but similar situations can often be spotted across the developing world, where similarly unsuitable donations have been made by visiting designers and architects wishing to contribute to a good cause. Since the 1970s, when Victor Papanek (1985) urged designers to become conscious of their social responsibility for the people of the third world, design interventions have increasingly taken on the form of progressive grassroots activities, for which they have been acclaimed. Under the popular term *humanitarian design*, designers, architects, engineers, and development professionals have been providing design-based solutions to problems of water purification, electricity, emergency shelter, social housing,

education, health, hygiene, micro finance, environmental issues, landmines, and so on (Architecture for Humanity, 2006; Bell & Wakeford, 2008; Berman, 2009; Johnson, 2011; Pilloton, 2009; Smithsonian Institution, 2007).

There is a question, however, whether such good intentions always result in positive consequences. Critical analysis and reflection on failures in humanitarian design practice have been rarely discussed. Only a few commentators point out that so-called “do-good” designs tend to be limited to mere technical fixes, while, at the same time, imposing cultural imperialism on the people and communities of developing countries (Johnson 2011; Nussbaum 2010). According to Johnson, the movement around humanitarian design holds a “modernist faith in the capacity of science to improve the human condition... [with] technological remedies for problems rooted in imperial histories and neoliberal restructuring” (p. 448). It is also noted that such

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capital-oriented, technology-aided top-down interventions might pose the danger of creating inequality among the communities they are seeking to help (Gramajo, 2014). Indeed, opinions were already being expressed in the early 1980s that designers visiting developing countries appeared to be “sweep(ing) into a native region like white missionaries, forcing their wisdom on the “natives” (Papanek, 1983, p. 153). Similarly, while there are an increasing number of design toolkits seeking to have a social impact, it should be questioned how relevant, adaptable, useable, and productive they might be in the real world (Kimbell, 2013).

This paper proposes a *social* design method as an alternative approach to the existing way design interventions are carried out in developing countries. This study is part of a PhD research project, and the methodology includes reviews of design movements and development studies along with action research fieldwork in Cambodia over 17 months. My background as a graphic designer with a specialty in service design and branding helped shape the procedures used in the fieldwork in three ways: by facilitating the process of creative exploration; by encouraging local collaboration; and by helping the participants define and reflect Khmer identity in the branding process. Through this study, I argue that social design might work better in the development context by recognising and using social qualities that can be found in the actors, networks, and devices existing in a particular context- social qualities that together can iteratively reassemble and create new relationships between processes, participants, and artefacts. This approach is particularly useful in international development because of the underlying complexity of the social challenges which exist in developing countries. The following section expands the argument by looking at conceptual elements of social design.

Why Social Design in Developing Countries?

The word ‘social’ in the phrase “Social Design” in this paper refers to Latour’s (2005) interpretation of “the social” as “a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (p. 7). This notion of “social” articulates a concept which is central to the meaning and practice of social design, since it fundamentally challenges the rationalist Western dualism-based paradigm (Escobar, 2012) which relies heavily on scientific technology and objective authoritarianism and draws a dividing line between rationality and social creativity: the West and the Rest; modern and non-modern; subject and object; developed and underdeveloped; universal versus situated knowledge. Instead, the idea of the “social” enables us to comprehensively understand our actual experience in the field as we find that inevitably we begin to “co-create the world with others with whom we live in co-existence” (Escobar, 2012, p. 18). This notion of the social then leads us to understand the idea of ‘device’. Device here is not necessarily

limited to a single mechanical artefact, rather it can be an object, a method, a catalyst, something that incites an atypical interaction between the actors—be they an object, a method, a designer, an event, an anecdote, and so on—in the social assemblage. In doing so, devices not only reveal that each actor is mutually constitutive, but also they reassemble and furthermore create new discourses, as they “articulate actions... act or make others act” (Callon, Millo & Muniesa 2007: 2). In other words, a device-centred perspective based on the Latourian way of perceiving the social offers us—social designers—not only a creative lens through which to look at things differently, but also methods for taking action.

Having noted working definitions of “the social” and of “devices”, let us consider this in the context of developing countries. First, because the social problems of developing countries are complex and often multi-layered, they cannot be solved using a single linear method or with one-off technical remedies. Social design approaches are appropriate here because they recognise human and nonhuman actors, fickle relations, and material conditions as all being entangled in any context. Second, these problems cannot be left to be solved by designers from regions that are more developed in terms of socio-economic and political status, because it is very likely that the outcome and spirit of these outside designers will disappear soon after the design team has left. This paper proposes an opportunity for social design which is able to rearrange and create socialities between actors which result in local empowerment and promote sustainable improvement. Third, working in developing countries means that designers will inevitably face challenges of language and/or cultural differences. Social design’s device-centred perspectives provides experimental and inventive tools for understanding and communicating with the local community, adopts local wisdom and generates live knowledge grounded in empirical evidence (see Figure 1).

In summary, it is my argument that social design would provide useful insights and methods to improve complicated social problems in developing countries, where designers often face cultural and language barriers as well as the question of how to build the capacity for a sustainable legacy. Successful social design practices are based on the strong premise that the designer should act as a ‘device’ throughout the process. This means that the designer needs to empower the participants from the very beginning of the project, with a focus on finding and reflecting their indigenous knowledge and values throughout the design process. At the same time, the designer should stimulate the associated elements—participants, devices, methods, and artefacts—to form a new kind of constructive relationship as the practice progresses, in order to achieve sustainable development. To prove this argument, the next section illustrates a field study conducted in a handcraft pottery community in Cambodia, with the aim of investigating how social design responds to the three points I addressed above—complex social problems, weak continuity, and the challenge of creating a sustainable legacy. More importantly, this field study provides an empirical extension of the social design discussion, based on the notion of expanding socio-technical relations.

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| Design challenges in international development | Conventional approaches | Social design approaches with device-centred perspectives |
|--|--|---|
| Complex and multi-layered problem situations | Technical fix; rational positivistic methods | Acknowledgement of human and nonhuman actors, fickle relations, and materializing conditions. |
| Weak continuity | Top-down training led by external designers | Rearrangement and creation of socialities between actors for local empowerment and sustainable development. |
| Cultural and / or language differences | Potential cultural imperialism | Experimental and inventive tools for understanding and communicating with the local communities; adopting local wisdom and generating live knowledge. |

Figure 1. Design challenges and opportunities in international development: Conventional approaches versus social design approaches with device-centred perspectives.

The Field Study

Earlier research on previous design approaches in developing countries and design specialties with social agendas revealed that they failed to acknowledge social relations, which is crucial when designing for social change (Johnson 2011; Nussbaum 2010). This has led me to explore alternative approaches that would a) clarify underlying problems situations which extend beyond technical deficiencies; b) empower local participation rather than rely on top-down training; c) gather and share local cultural knowledge; and d) ensure sustainable outcomes that would last. In order to examine the problems inherent in the context under study and in order to explore possible ways of finding solutions to those problems the study employs a device-centred perspective. This approach is grounded in empirical practice.

Background



Figure 2. Traditional pottery production in open fire. Andong Russey village in Kampong Chhnang province, Cambodia. Photograph: the author.

Kampong Chhnang province is located 91km. northwest of Phnom Penh, the capital. As its name literally means ‘port of pottery’ in Khmer, villages in the province have traditionally been producing pottery for centuries (Shippen, 2005; see Figure 2). However, as a consequence of the nation’s turbulent history, most of the cultural heritage and infrastructure of pottery making, and the artisans themselves, have vanished. Since the late 1990s several interventions by international NGOs have attempted to improve the technology of ceramic production. These took place at the

time when the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts was founded in 1997, and a bigger discourse on sustainable development through cultural approaches was encouraged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1990) when it initiated the World Decade for Cultural Development 1988-1998. At that time the pottery communities in Kampong Chhnang were seen as possessing cultural heritage and national identity, but at the same time were seen to be “desperately (in) need(ed) (of) support” (Ludwig, 2012, p. 2).

Among the several NGO interventions in Kampong Chhnang pottery communities, three main projects are identified here. The first, Project (A) was conducted jointly by two German organisations from 1998 to 2007. Each employed a two-fold approach: building infrastructure and training local potters. Much of the emphasis was given to the introduction of new technology and handcraft techniques through the use of pottery wheels and kilns. One hundred and twenty Khmer potters participated in the training programme led by German ceramists, and four of them were given an opportunity to study at a vocational school in Germany for three months (Ludwig, 2012).

The second, Project (B), led by another German organisation between 2009 and 2010, aimed to upgrade the value chain. The most visible outcome was the ‘Pottery Design Competition’, which matched university students from Phnom Penh with potters in Kampong Chhnang, to create prototypes of new ceramic design.

Last, Project (C), funded by a Japanese organisation, has been focusing on teaching technical skills and adding values since 2009. Half a dozen of Japanese ceramists have visited the village in turns, staying from between two weeks and two years, to build a workshop and kilns, and to teach pottery-making, glazing, and firing techniques. The intention was to hand over the entire infrastructure to the Khmer potters by the end of 2015.

By exploring the past history of the handcraft pottery villages, and the history of previous NGO interventions and their influences, not only could I avoid repeating the same work, but I also gained a sense of the dynamics around the community. This background research helped me to identify problem situations, and helped me to come up with the context-specifically-situated ideas for the Social Design Workshop sessions (using action research methodology), which were conducted in collaboration with the participants.

Methods and Process

The field study in this paper is part of a PhD research project to investigate the meaning and practice of social design in international development. For an in-depth understanding of the context, and the problems to be found there, the fieldwork was conducted in two parts. The first part included 11 months' of background research, including deskwork, observation, and interviews with the community members, in order to get a sense of contextual background and to build trust with them. The second part involved participatory action research, conducted in Andong Russey village in Kampong Chhnang province between October 2014 and March 2015. This was to test out a set of design methods, and to conduct the *Social Design Workshop* with local potters in the community.

Participatory action research was chosen as a main research method because this allowed me to investigate real world problems, to immerse myself in the context, to actively participate in the phenomenon, and to step into the community and experiment with a set of social design practices. As action research embraces the idea of improvement and involvement (Robson, 2011), the method proved to be useful in developing a series of collaborative design workshop sessions. At the same time, the spiral and iterative process involved in participatory action research enabled me to constantly reflect on the process and to make changes for further improvement and learning throughout the research project (McNiff, 2014; Robson, 2011).

Ten Khmer potters from Project (C) participated in the action research based *Social Design Workshop* during this period. As explained above, Project (C) was confronting the challenge of how to hand over the pottery workshop to the Khmer potters within a year, and it was important to ensure that they have the capabilities, skills and conceptual understanding to run production and trade by themselves. By viewing their problem as something that required understanding social relations and bigger issues beyond those that were purely technical, it seemed appropriate to work with them.

The next section illustrates the detailed process and activities of the *Social Design Workshop*.

Social Design Practices to See, Act, and Change Differently

As discussed in the earlier part of this article, social design is not only about addressing social issues through participatory approaches and sustainable improvement, but more importantly it creates and rearranges social relations around a phenomenon, which in turn can affect the ways in which we view and live in the world, and interact with others. Based on this notion of social design as a creative device, I illustrate the process of problematisation—in other words, the ways in which social design practices enable us to see, act, and change differently, compared to conventional problem solving approaches. By revealing kilns and previous NGO interventions as troubling actors, I then move on to describe the process of empowering the participants to identify their *own* problems and needs, and how this has affected the reconfiguration of new socialities.

Problematisation:

Revealing Kilns as Troubling Actors

The first part of the fieldwork revealed that previous NGO activities in the pottery communities of Kampong Chhnang appeared to have provided conventional problem solving approaches focused on rational technicality. Since they defined the problem as 'poor quality of pottery products, primitive skills, poverty, lack of infrastructure for production, and weak value chain' (H. Ake, personal communication, February 13 and March 6, 2014; German Technical Cooperation, 2009; Ludwig, 2012; Saruta, personal communication, December 6, 2014; Yamazaki, 2015), the majority of their support focused on building infrastructure (community centres, kilns, etc.); and inviting ceramists from Germany and Japan to teach the local potters new skills and techniques. These were by no means pointless supports; indeed these technical supports to a certain extent contributed to the modern construction of pottery production. However, ultimately these resulted in infrastructural inequalities.

For example, Project (A) built five ceramic centres in three villages, so that community members could share kilns and other equipment. However, it was observed during the field visits that the infrastructure was not fairly shared among the village potters, because each village had different preferences in working style (individual versus cooperative). Moreover, three out of the five kilns were broken and abandoned, and instead of fixing these, potters were wishing to be given new high-temperature kilns (see Figure 3). Ironically, most of the local potters had gone back to their traditional way of working because they preferred 'less firewood and less work to prepare the kiln' (German Technical Cooperation, 2009) and could not afford imported glazing materials. Overall, the intervention appeared to have weak continuity, a lack of capacity building, and heavy dependencies on technicality and NGO aid.

Indeed, these NGO interventions appeared to have failed to perceive and treat the Khmer potters as creative artisans with indigenous knowledge and autonomous capabilities. Without considering the relations within the communities and the potential consequences of imported technicality and training, these interventions resulted in growing dependencies and a loss of confidence in the people and pottery communities. In other words, previous NGO activities left the challenges of participatory knowledge generation, capacity building, sustainable development, and fundamental social change as deficient as they were before the intervention, if not worse.

Spending time in the potters' community was the first step towards problematisation, helping me to identify the kilns and previous NGO activities as troubling actors within the network of pottery communities and Khmer potters, and to see how this had affected the production of ceramics. It appeared that the kilns and other technical skills brought in by foreign NGOs have had a significant effect on the pottery communities in Kampong Chhnang. Without allowing much space for independence and creativity, these interventions eventually created a division between designers and producers; teachers and students; donors



Figure 3. Broken kilns and abandoned signage given by the Project (A).

and recipients; and technology and indigenous knowledge. Kilns were creating a new kind of relationship among the community members, which made the local potters dependent on the technical knowledge of foreign teachers, and on aid from NGOs.

In order to improve the production and trade of ceramics in this handcraft community, the conventional problem solving approach focused on reinforcing top-down training and on providing technical infrastructure. Instead, I focused on finding out alternative approaches to redirect and expand the potters' attention beyond technicality and hierarchical training. If something fundamental could change their mindsets, working habits, and relationships, they would be able to cultivate their own development by leading the way they work and train, rather than relying on external help. This idea has led to the following questions—what is it that would fundamentally change the production-trade process and improve the value chain? Can creativity play a role in capacity building? In what way could social design be adopted and engaged within this context?

Designing Conditions for New Socialities

Instead of following the footsteps of previous NGO interventions in the pottery communities, the field study started with a premise that the local potters might need to expand their attention beyond technical and external support. The introduction of kilns and technical training was essential in the beginning of the community restoration; nonetheless the overcentralisation of technicality posed a danger of limiting the potters to become mere technicians. This means that they might find it necessary to keep looking for external support, financial aid, and foreign teachers for their production and trade.

To nurture creativity and capacity building, I assumed that a social design approach might help fundamentally change the way the potters could develop originality and autonomy over a long-term period. It would open more choices for them to transform themselves from mere technicians to become designers and/or entrepreneurs, ultimately producing better income and economic independence in general. At the same time, the participants would be able to redefine and visually articulate their Khmer identity, deviating from the Japanese and German influences which they had been subjugated to, by creating their own visual references and original design ideas, since they know about the Khmer culture and ceramics better than anyone else.

In order to experiment with social design practices in terms of creating new relations between the potters, communities, working process, and dependencies, I focused on designing and facilitating the Social Design Workshop sessions with two aims. First, the Social Design Workshop had to respond to the challenge faced by Project (C), by exploring the ways in which the participants could create original design ideas and develop knowledge about trade and branding, so that they could successfully run the pottery workshop without external help. Second, and more importantly, the Social Design Workshop had to stimulate strong motivations and a sense of ownership for the project, emphasising that it is the participants who should identify the problem situation, rather than waiting until someone comes to tell them what to do or how things should be done. Thus, I carried out the process of problematisation with the participants from the very beginning of the workshop, in order to let the participants identify what they perceived as their *own* problems and challenges. This not only helped the participants to conceptualize their problem situation and challenges, but also helped the formation of a strong trust between them and me as a researcher-designer. These actions raised the sense of ownership throughout the workshop sessions, which enriched active participation and a willingness to take initiative. This in consequence created new socio-technical relations between the participants, kilns, and the way they treat the notions of creativity and technicality.

The Social Design Workshop: Its Process and Activities

The Social Design Workshop took place over the course of 11 sessions, involving ten Khmer potters (six women and four men) and myself as a facilitator-designer, with the help of a Khmer translator. Usually there was a 1-2 weeks' break between each workshop in order to reflect upon the previous one and prepare for the next one. The overall structural plan of the workshop was designed to gradually build a narrative process with the participants through four phases (see Figure 4 & Figure 5). First, it was important to *understand* the problem situation by getting to know the participants; their needs and wants, inspirations, challenges, worries, and identities; and build trust with them. This included interviews, observation, creating mood boards, discussing with image cards, drawing, and taking photographs. Second, we then moved on to *create* design ideas and cultural

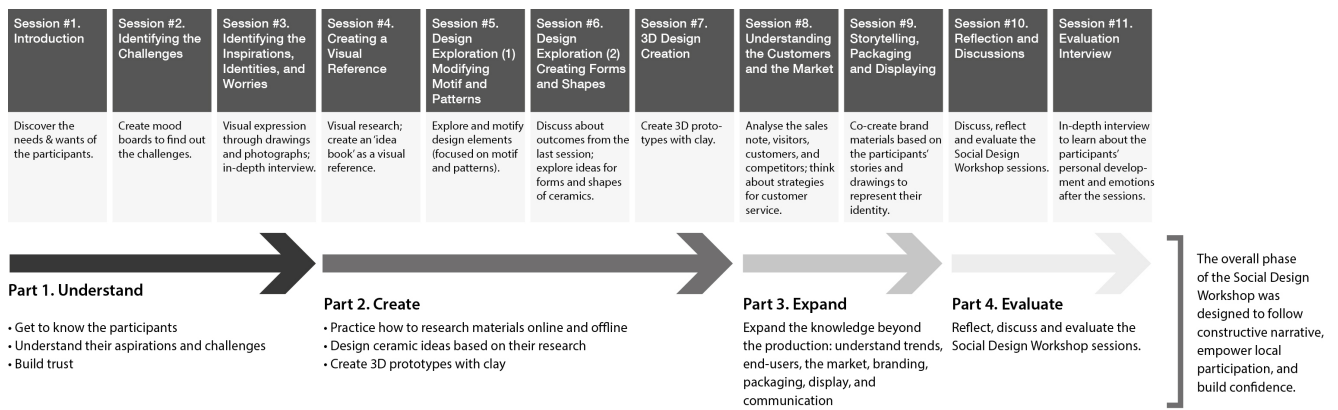


Figure 4. The process of the Social Design Workshop. The overall phase of the Social Design Workshop was designed to follow a constructive narrative, to empower local participation, and to build confidence.



Figure 5. Four phases of the Social Design Workshop. (Clockwise from top left) understand; create; expand; and evaluate.

identities for ceramic production by researching materials, developing visual references, creating ceramic design ideas, and prototyping. Third, we further *expanded* the knowledge beyond production, by exploring trends, end-users, the market, branding, display, storytelling, and communication that would help the sales and promotion of the products. This was done through a series of interviews, photograph analysis, discussions, and co-designing brand materials. Finally, we spent the last two sessions on *evaluating* the entire Social Design Workshop by reflecting and discussing the process, methods, outcomes, emotions, and personal development.

Each session lasted three hours, starting with a short brief on the task. It was stressed that the participants were encouraged to work initiatively since this was a ‘collaborative workshop’, unlike the previous ‘training-taught-by-foreign-teachers’. It was important that the participants take this as an opportunity to

enhance their design capabilities and market knowledge, hence contributing to the improvement of the community economy and self-esteem at large.

Throughout the workshop sessions, I tried to make use of visual materials as much as possible, by encouraging the participants to articulate their thoughts through drawing, taking photographs, and creating mood boards and scrapbooks (see Figure 6). By doing so, the participants could visually express their intuitive thoughts and local knowledge, rather than through verbal or written communication. This was helpful not only in terms of overcoming the language barrier, but also in instilling confidence in their participation through materialising tangible creative outcomes from their activities. At the final evaluation interview, which took place after the completion of the six-months workshop sessions, the participants noted that “[I]t was great to work out how to draw inspirations from mundane object to create

ceramic designs”; “I liked to see our clumsy drawings and stories were brought together and nicely put onto a bag. This will help the customer learn about our work and the Khmer culture.”



Figure 6. The participants of the Social Design Workshop; visual materials prepared by the author.

Reconfigured Relationships: Findings from the Social Design Workshop

This section illustrates the narrative process of the Social Design Workshop, which reconfigured new socialities based on four key anecdotal moments: from self-realisation, capacity building, and communication to the creation of new relationships.

Self-Realisation

In the beginning of the field study, it was revealed that the participants thought of themselves as mere technicians, and wanted to *be taught* by designers and teachers from abroad. In order to challenge this conventional and passive approach, it was important to start by designing conditions for the potters to realise their potentials and capabilities beyond technical skills. The workshop sessions focused on letting the participants experience a range of different expertise (research, design, branding, communication, sales, and customer service) and constantly interact with each other through discussions and collaboration. In the post-workshop interviews, it was discovered that the participants took this workshop as a starting point to plan their careers. They were beginning to see themselves as designers, entrepreneurs, and cultural transmitters. Some of them shared blueprints on how to run a family business in the near future, adopting new roles they acquired through the workshop (wife as a designer and husband as a technician and entrepreneur).

Capacity Building

As the participants gradually changed the way they saw themselves and the way they engaged with their work, industry, and the market, the workshop progressed in order to help build

their capacity and confidence. In this process, social design’s device-centred perspective played an important role by inventing experimental tools that could be used to devise visual cues, which could then be used throughout the workshop. By visually materialising the working process and the outcomes of their participation, creative activities, and knowledge development, the participants could track the learning process and their own personal development. For the designer, it proved to be a useful tool to help the participants to focus on their capacity building in a narrative manner, despite cultural and linguistic differences.

Communication

As the workshop sessions progressed, the communication flow between the management (Japanese staff) and the participants gradually changed. While the previous donor-recipient relationship was aligned with strict top-down and one-way direction, the collaborative process of the Social Design Workshop set a ground for open discussions. The management staff began to listen to the participants and reflect the opinions that repetitively appeared throughout the workshop (e.g., installation of electricity, and shop display with locally-sourced materials). Both parties took these workshop sessions in order to improve mutual understanding and to develop democratic communication.

The Creation of New Relationship

In the post-workshop interview, L (Male, 28 years old, potter participant with five years of experience) told me that this was the first time he experienced the ‘ladies’ work’, which was to shape and decorate ceramics:

There always had been strict gender role in pottery production in our village. But I would not care whether it is ladies’ job or not. I realised that I am very interested in, and quite good at shaping and decorating. I would like to keep working on it.

Also as a newlywed groom, L said that the earlier part of the workshop, which was to find aspirations and challenges, let him to rigorously think about his future and life plan. Another participant, O (Male, 33 years old, potter participant with five years of experience), told me that he became confident and ambitious about his job as a result of the workshop:

Working as a potter in Kampong Chhnang earns me a tenth part, compared to my previous factory job overseas. It is true that more and more young Khmers hope to work in urban factories and work abroad, to make a fortune. But I prefer to work here, to be surrounded by my family and friends... These workshop sessions opened my eyes, in a way that I could try a range of different things that I never experienced before. Study never ends. I want to make sure that ten of us continue working together at unity for long.

These anecdotes suggest that the participants began to reassemble their relationship as knowledge generators just like their former teachers, rearranging themselves in the network of their work, family, community, work ethics, and life at large. This new relationship is expected to affect and contribute to the improvement of ceramic production and trade in the future.

Research Implications

The field study shows that social design practices can be useful in improving the handcraft pottery community situation in developing countries. A device-centred perspective, and the co-evolution of problem and solution spaces with the participants from the beginning helped identify the underlying challenges; understand the relations between the actors, devices, and the context; and reassemble the constellation of relations in order to ensure autonomous and sustainable development. I argue that in order to successfully run social design practices, it is important to understand the concept of *situatedness*, which acknowledges the socio-cultural-technical specificity of each case. In this process, designers should act not only as facilitators, but as catalysts that stimulate relationships and actions between the participants, activities, communities, and contexts to stimulate personal development and improved outcomes (see Figure 7).

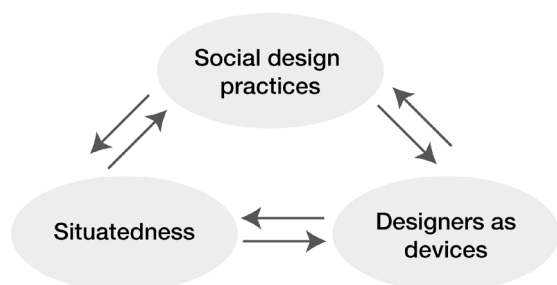


Figure 7. Framework model for social design practices.

Situated Design Methods for Sustainable Development

The research has shown the need to pay attention to the notion of socialities and relational constellations between the actors, phenomenon, the context, and continuous change. I propose social design practice as an alternative approach in the international development context, based on Haraway's notion of *situated knowledge*, which looks at knowledge production in relation to specific contextual, social, and situational circumstances grounded in a local context (Dorst, 2003; Haraway, 1988; Simonsen et al., 2014). Understanding that each problem is uniquely situated in its context and people, interventions need to be carefully investigated and designed to respond to the specific situation and problem. Universal methods such as design toolkits might be referenced as a starting point, but they are unable to deliver the precise responses, processes, and methods to address local and subjective solutions that need to be specifically grounded in a local problem situation. For example, in the preparation process I reviewed an extensive number of design toolkits and guidelines made for the development context, however the specificity of the problem situation which I was studying made me adopt and invent new methods that would exactly respond to that situation. As explained in the previous section, this led me to use visual methods extensively, which not only helped overcome the issue of language, but also encouraged the participants to articulate their ideas and to actively take part in the process.

Also, the process of planning appeared to be important in relation to the notion of situatedness. Plans are to be regarded as guidelines, which "can be altered in accordance with the situation at hand", instead of being applied as a fixed procedure to follow (Simonsen et al., 2014). In this respect, the Social Design Workshop was only partially planned in the beginning, as it was impossible to design an overall plan before even understanding the participants and the problem situation. Therefore the Social Design Workshop started with ideas for the first 2-3 sessions in the beginning, but then it gradually evolved as the workshop progressed (see Figure 8). By responding to the participants' development and the situated context, reflections from previous workshops played an important role in developing plans for the next sessions. This in turn helped the participants generate knowledge by following the narrative sequence of the overall plan. The notion of situatedness enabled the participants' actions and development to be "shaped moment by moment in response to local contingencies" (Simonsen et al., 2014, p. 5) as they collectively created a common knowledge basis.

Social Design and Designers as Catalysing Devices

The notion of situatedness then leads us to the question of designer's agencies. If we cannot set and apply objective design methods universally, how can we make sure our expertise is applied successfully? How can we transfer the methods and process of knowledge generation to different contexts?

As we take account of subjectivity and local situatedness in social design practices, designers' agencies and responsibilities come to play a significant part in the process. The fact that the problem situation has been *reconstructed*, instead of being given, means that the designer's ontological notion and expertise has already been reflected in the process. Since each case needs to be approached and designed differently, designers are responsible for what they identify as a problem situation; and how they approach it comes from their own experience and reflection. In this sense, the Social Design Workshop was intended to perform as a trigger/device to rearrange the elements around the pottery community, hence achieving a "socio-ontological change" (Marres, 2012, p. 89). In this sense, social design practice and designers can be defined as the "device of ontological intervention" that opens up the space for participation and for the reconfiguration of social relations (p. 89).

In developing countries, designers might face unpredictable challenges due to different social, cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds (Hussain, Sanders, & Steinert, 2012). Despite it all, it should be stressed that the allocation of more assignments and responsibilities to social designers should not be used to justify top-down training and hierarchical knowledge transfer. Rather, social designers should be able to devise the ways in which they can stimulate and catalyse local relationships, in order to discover and raise the participants' knowledge and abilities, without interfering or imposing authoritative answers. Such approaches should be built on a respectful understanding of the local community and strong trust between the designer and participants.

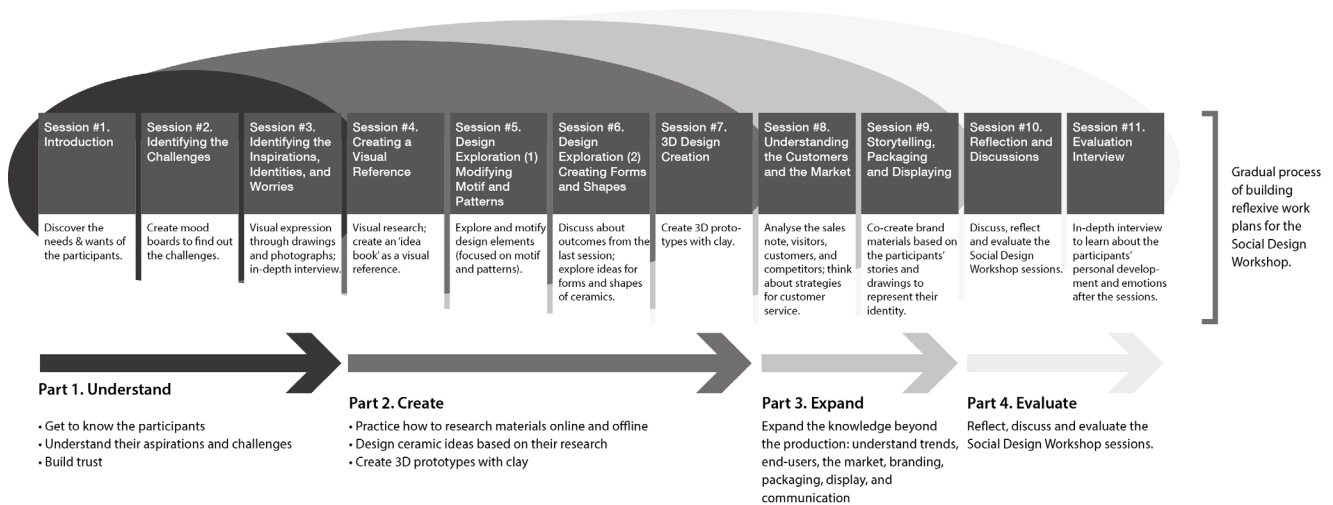


Figure 8. Description of the situated Social Design Workshop plan.
It shows the gradual process of building reflexive work plans for the Social Design Workshop.

Conclusion and Further Research

In this empirical research, I proposed social design practices as an alternative approach to be used in developing countries. Based on the notion of social relations between human and non-human actors, artefacts, phenomenon, and the context, device-centred perspectives of social design proved to have provided useful approaches in complex problem situations, where previous NGO interventions have left multiple challenges. The research reported in this paper aims to expand social design discourse beyond that usually provided from regions that are more developed in terms of socio-economic and political status, by providing a practitioner's reflective perspective on social design grounded in both theory and as a result of a field study in a handcraft community in Cambodia.

In order to ensure sustainable development through capacity building, a set of design methods was experimented with by engaging the study's participants in a form of democratic collaboration titled 'Social Design Workshop' sessions. In this process, social design methods were used to overcome the limitations of conventional problem-solving formulations, by reconstructing the problem situation with the participants from the beginning; problematising previous NGO interventions and kilns as troubling actors; and exploring relationships between the problem and solution spaces with the participants.

Rather than producing an exhaustive list of possible methods and design toolkits, this study focused on expanding the definition and capabilities of social design and on the concept of designers becoming mediating devices in international development. Through the field study, I found that it is significant to recognise the notion of social-cultural-technical situatedness in methods, process, and the context. Due to the subjective nature of design problems, successful approaches need to be established by understanding and reflecting on the local situation and specific condition; and being aware of designers' ontological notions in the process of knowledge creation and in the reconfiguration of social relations.

This research is only a beginning step to propose social design practices in developing countries as an alternative approach to existing design interventions. Since the development context often involves manifold and complicated challenges, device-centred perspectives of social design would provide in-depth understandings about the relations between people, the context, the market, NGO activities, and devices. Although this paper did not include a discussion of partnership relationships with local councils, due to several issues of dependency on donor funding and low council budgets, future research will need to seek ways in which collaboration with local authorities affects an intervention's legitimacy and sustainability. More field studies need to be conducted with critical perspectives on existing design approaches, to open up further debate and to prevent misconducted interventions in the development context.

There seem to be two opportunities for the further research. First, since much of the success of social design practices depends on the designer's expertise in devising and transferring design approaches, a sophisticated framework for designers is needed to replace straightforward how-to toolkits. Second, it should be noted that practising social design in developing countries may be theorised and applied differently from the ways in which it is done in developed countries. It would be interesting to investigate and test out social designs in the context of developing countries, and to compare the process and outcome to those social designs with social designs in developed countries. By doing so, it would provide fresh perspectives and a set of new contributions to social design debates.

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