Collecting Seeds, Nurturing Growth, and Cultivating Potential
An alternative concept for facilitating long-term co-creativity in local communities

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Introduction
Based on our experience from a recent co-design project with regular workshops in the community centre of a Tokyo neighborhood [1] that involved staff members and local residents, we are suggesting a “farming metaphor” for managing long-term co-creation processes as an alternative model for describing the special constraints and opportunities of such an approach.

Co-creation processes are very different from the traditional design approach which is based on a fixed project brief from clients and based in the studio environment. The real life context is complex, dynamic and fuzzy: situations involve different actors with their own agendas and changing behaviour. Also the outcome and goal of co-creation processes are not necessarily evident [2]. It is therefore difficult to “control” such processes in the traditional sense. For many reasons new concepts are needed: once to avoid misunderstanding, disappointment and frustration of all involved - participants, organizers and financiers, but also to being able to recognize the new possibilities and potentials of long term co-creation approaches.

Analogies and metaphors are powerful ways to create understanding. They are widely used in domains like education and organizational leadership to describe and reduce complexity. By relating unusual topics, analogies and metaphors are also able to introduce fresh perspectives and innovative concepts. We have chosen the topic of “farming” as the source for a number of analogies due to many reasons: First, farming takes place in a complex eco-system with numerous independent actors (plants, animals, the farmer and other humans) that co-exists in complex relationships. Second, the process of farming is subject to ongoing and dynamic transformations like the changing of seasons and different weather conditions. Third, the common act and vocabulary of the farming domain are well known to non-professionals and can create a shared understanding among a wide group of people.

From Planning to Preparedness
Underlying our suggested approach is an alternative understanding of reality and efficacy as described by the sinologist François Jullien [3]. He compares an almost mechanical way of classic Greek thinking with a more organic set of tactics that have originated in ancient Asian philosophy: whereas the western way proposes a goal focused planning that tries to adapt reality to its desired outcome, the alternative Asian view is grounded in the actual flow of events and seeks to recognizes the innate potential of the situation to develop it the direction of the overall broad intentions. (Figure 1 and 2).

Following this view, we are proposing a shift from long-term planning to an aware state of situational preparedness for manging co-creation processes.

Exploring the Land
As seeds can not grow without earth, we initiated our project by searching a promising environment for engaging local residents in a co-design process for developing local media. The community cafe “Shibano Ie”, situated in a traditional Tokyo neighbourhood, proved to be such a “fertile ground” by providing an open meeting space for neighbours and being connected with the nearby Keio University at the same time. To better understand the local context, we initiated a range of mapping workshops with local participants for identifying the special actors, existing resources and pressing needs of that area.

Preparing the Ground
While we got a more comprehensive understanding of the local context, we began to “prepare the ground” for ideas to “germinate” by initiating weekly workshops that were open for everyone to attend. This framework of regular meetings helped to create a sense of trust in the community and the continuity of our workshops became a fundamental source for nurturing the co-creation process.
Collecting Seeds
As professional designers we are trained to generate independent and diverse ideas. In the context of working together with local communities however, it is important to understand that most of the “seeds” for future ideas can be found already existing in the potential of the nearby surrounding and in the minds of the people living there. It is our function to collect this “seeds” by facilitating the creative expression of participants through carefully observing, listening and asking. In that sense we found that our initial intentions in the early stages of our project were to closely defined. That gave us a hard time in being open and acknowledging the special potential of the local context and the people that we were designing together with.

Nurturing Growth
The development from initial ideas to scenarios and prototypes by co-designing can be described as a slow and fragile “growth process”. As facilitating designers, we see our role in supporting this process by providing the optimal conditions for participants to test and further develop their ideas and design concepts.
As we can only indirectly influence this process, it takes a lot of patience and empathy to follow the speed and rhythm of the community and its members.
During our project it took numerous iterations for developing single prototypes like a neighbourhood notice board. But during this organic process the initial concept transformed significantly and in unforeseeable ways, better fitting into the local context and the people that we were designing together with.

Cultivating Potentials
It is our intention to “cultivate” the creative potential of the community and people that we are working with by gradually extending their abilities to develop design solutions in a self-sufficient an independent manner.
Some main factors for accomplishing this are:
First, providing practical design tools in the form of hard and software that are robust and easy to use. Second, teaching and training participants to use these tools in creative and independent ways. Third, creating a spirit of self-esteem based on the teaching, training, and providing an interface for exchanging their local achievements with a wider international and professional audience that can provide their feedback in return.

Conclusion
When using analogies and metaphors there are always the dangers of misleading and over simplification. This is especially true for biological metaphors in regards to social systems and human culture.
However, by proposing the metaphor of “farming” with its associated aspects and principles we hope to introduce a more appropriate vocabulary for engaging in long term co-creation processes and for reflecting upon them.
We feel that the “messiness” of this process is better described in such an organic model, since it is inherently linked to complex settings and dynamic change.
Since the start of the project in summer 2010, we have developed and realised the idea of a community sharing board and a neighbourhood magazine together with staff members and local residents of the community centre.
In the next phase we are aiming to create stronger synergies between both the sharing board and the magazine to create more opportunities for people in the neighborhood to connect with each other.
One of the directions that we are approaching is the gradual merging of the currently mainly analog systems with digital technologies and interactive platforms.
Researching in the field of such “hybrid” analog-digital local communication systems, we plan to further deepen our understanding about the usefulness or organic metaphors for complex co-designing projects.

References
[1] Shiba-no Ie Community Centre, Tokyo, Japan (www.shibanoie.net).

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