How the skill sets of Graphic Design is so vital to sheltered workshops employing people with learning disabilities

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Introduction

This paper explores the relevance of the skill set of professional graphic designers and the role within challenging social contexts based on a new approach to the inclusive design process whose aim is the empowerment of socially and economically marginalised communities through design. The paper showcases the Hinamatsuri project, where designers and people with learning disabilities collaborated to create a range of mainstream design products.

The new “social” inclusive design approach

Inclusive design is a collaborative design process whereby those often excluded from commercial design processes work with designers to create effective design solutions for a broader span of the population. A new approach used in this project is where inclusive design’s collaborative co-design process is harnessed to mainstream design principles and used as a means to empower socially and economically marginalised people.

The initial template for this approach was trialled in the 2009 All Inclusive Sarajevo project. Professional designers (including myself) from the UK, Bosnia, Croatia and Serbia worked with deaf employees of four sheltered workshops in Sarajevo. The aim was to co-design and prototype a new product range to revitalise their income stream. The workshop model was used subsequently in Croatia and Macedonia creating change for many involved. In particular, two award-winning workshops held in Croatia in 2011 and 2012 involving people with learning disabilities demonstrated how graphic design practices were crucial to success with this population. The design teams were composed primarily of graphic designers who generated a range of high quality design goods based on the drawings of their learning-disabled design partners. By structuring the design and production process, controlling quality and using their holistic art direction and editing skills, graphic designers created a unified set of design results that could be easily produced and sold by the organisations involved. It showed that graphic design skills allied to basic branding practices could be used beyond the commercial realm to create real change in socially and economically challenging situations.

Defining the skills sets of a Graphic Designer

Graphic Designers are creators of visual language. They must use a diverse mix of ‘design sources’ provided by the client to create a coherent visual language output such as a logo, poster, campaign or editorial. Design sources refers to information, visual imagery, physical materials which are provided or available to the designer. Irrespective of whether the field is advertising, branding or editorials, graphic designers must employ three key skills to produce a successful design result – they must interpret, edit and synthesize the design sources in order to create a coherent visual identity or narrative from complex, often conflicting design sources across a range of media. For example, a visual identity must be transferable from the computer screen to paper, textiles and even 3D objects. These three skills have proved vital within the challenging context of sheltered workshops employing people with learning disabilities as the following case study demonstrates.

The Hinamatsuri Project Design Context

Our design partner was Himawari-en and Yazaike-fukushi-en, part of Adachi no Sato, a welfare organisation in Adachi Ward,
Tokyo. It provides recreational activities, vocational training and work opportunities for adults with learning and/or multiple disabilities who are unable to integrate into mainstream work environments. Himawari-en runs a bakery and delivery service and does small-scale component assembly while Yazaike does recycling work and provides cleaning services. All 90 beneficiaries receive a monthly income of around 10,000 yen. There are no arts/design-trained staff, only specialists in welfare and disability whose work involves managing the behavioural issues of the beneficiaries. Their work consists of subcontracted low-level low paid assembly work such as packaging chopsticks (0.5 yen per unit) or assembling coat hangers (2 yen per unit) with only the bakery business earning around 15,000,000 yen annually. Thus, Adachi no Sato depends largely on public subsidies to support their staff, beneficiaries and facilities, but aims to increase its total income. By continuing such low-level assembly work, it is difficult to see how this can be done unless a new income-generation method is developed.

Saori weaving (Fig. 2) is another activity and volunteers create products from the cloth woven by beneficiaries resulting in a great variation in the finished products. The lack of quality control or professional design input means that they are of low quality and cannot be sold commercially but are bought as welfare products out of pity. Art activities are held for the beneficiaries but led by staff with no specialist training and are run as a rehabilitation activity, not a work program (Fig. 2). Thus, the potential of using their art works as sources for design is not realised. An advantage of using their drawings as sources for design is that a range of products can be realised from a single set of drawings, many of which show a freshness and originality of ideas that were realistic to the context they were working in. Then, under the guidance of three volunteer senior designers, a set of initial prototypes was created including simple products such as chopstick holders, paper plates and packaging and more complex ones such as accessories and games under the sub-theme of a "Hinamaturi party". My focus was not on the obvious "star players" with existing drawing talent but rather to see how each individual's mark-making could be optimised and become the basis for creating a product range. I achieved this by creating the necessary material and templates to control the quality of the drawings and marks so that they could be utilised efficiently as "design material".

A three-day workshop was organised for the design students who had visited Himawari-en to understand the design context. It started with a brainstorming session with Adachi no Sato staff, to create a mind map of words. This was to establish the critical problems faced by the staff and beneficiaries and to set the design brief - to bring out the unique characteristics of the drawings and/or design a product that the beneficiaries could construct themselves. This session helped the designers interpret and edit the design sources smoothly, to generate ideas that were realistic to the context they were working in. The Project: Hinamatsuri Project

The Hinamatsuri Project, took place between September 2013 and February 2014. A team of professional designers and design students from Tokyo University of the Arts designed a range of graphic-based products in collaboration with Himawari-en and Yazaike-fukushien with myself as design leader. We created a Dolls Festival product range based on the beneficiaries' drawings but reinterpreted by the designers. My unique approach was that I did not just use the existing drawings, as in previous workshops but initiated and led the process whereby the drawings were generated. Over the period of a month, I went weekly to Himawari-en and Yazaike to mentor beneficiaries, assess their drawings skills, spot their strengths and encourage picture and mark making on the Doll's Festival theme. My focus was not on the obvious "star players" with existing drawing talent but rather to see how each individual's mark-making could be optimised and become the basis for creating a product range. I achieved this by creating the necessary material and templates to control the quality of the drawings and marks so that they could be utilised efficiently as "design material".

Fig 2. Drawing activities and Saori weavings at Himawari-en