Participatory action research: Rethinking the differences between design strategies in Taiwan and Japan

Using the “Disaster Prevention & Reconstruction + Design Workshop” as an example
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1. Introduction
Global environmental and social changes have brought increasing attention to the issues of social design in social development and business innovations in Taiwan. Social design draws on the concept of human care and pursues a mission of giving a society-changing power to the relationships among people, events, and environments, to create shared values. There are currently many issues that require serious consideration, for instance, support for underprivileged groups, disaster prevention, resource recovery, and regional revitalization. In Taiwan, strategies related to disaster prevention, regional revitalization, and social recovery require the most attention due to the frequent occurrence of earthquakes in this area. Design education should focus on the issues of application of social design in practice, promotion of social care, and implementation of humanistic design. Social design has long been a major concern in Japan which has seen many successful cases of industry-government-academia cooperation and promotion of human care through design.

This study conducted the ‘Disaster Prevention & Reconstruction + Design Workshop’ in collaboration with the ‘Creative Reconstruction’ course taught at School of Art and Design, University of Tsukuba. Japan’s experience in and approach to design education was applied in the process of this workshop. A transnational design team was formed from Taiwanese and Japanese students to learn more about Japan’s design educational practices and analyze the differences in positioning and the design strategies between Taiwanese and Japanese students through mutual interaction and design implementation. The reflection on this workshop and effective guidance were also noted to serve as a reference for those engaged in related areas in Taiwan.

2. Method and Process
By employing participatory action research (PAR), this study integrated cyclic action research and cooperative participation. Investigation of the relations and interaction between researchers and participants in this study was based on Lewin’s (1946) action research, in which the ultimate objective of research is achieved through cycles of observation, plan, action, and reflection (McNiff, 1988, p. 22). The methods used for PAR depend on the circumstances; for example, in case of participatory research, the team can conduct ethnographic research, field work, observation of participation, and in-depth interviews. This study also employed the Design Thinking process model that developed by the Institute of Design at Stanford (2012). This model consists of stages as follows: empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test.

The target area for design and research in a one-week ‘Disaster Prevention & Reconstruction + Design’ international workshop was Fuxing District, Taoyuan City, Taiwan. where the aboriginal tribes had suffered greatly from typhoons. The participants included 22 Taiwanese and Japanese students divided into four teams led by four Taiwanese and Japanese instructors and one senior Taiwanese designer.

The process of this workshop adopted PAR because participants were not very familiar with the target field. Differences between Taiwanese and Japanese students’ design strategies, in terms of problem finding and discussion, problem definition process and methods, proposition of important design-related ideas, and design strategy implementation, were investigated through PAR which involved problem finding, data analysis, field surveys and interviews, design planning, problem definition, convergence of innovations, and definition of design strategies and methods. Methodology and procedure of participatory action research in this study are shown in Figure 1.

3. Results & Discussion
3.1 Design Instruction Framework
Because of difference cultural background, main focus of the overall design instruction was empathizing and contemplation of definition and determining direction. In general, Taiwanese and Japanese participants differed in their familiarity with the studied issue and the target field, as well as related experience. The instructors in the emphasizing stage provided a detailed plan of how to coordinate the design direction between designers and local residents, as well as each other, and encourage them to explore the problem through field observation and interpretation.
During the definition and determining direction stage which promoted deep, creative, and convergent thinking, the teams related to practical experiences of local residents by participating in their lives, continuously deepening and reflecting on the existing situation, and proposing solutions, thus actively improving disaster prevention and rejuvenation in the explored area. Definitions and directions should be collected among designers, local residents, and instructors at least twice in order to reach a general consensus among the three parties. This would be effective to solve problems in the studied area.

3.2 Differences in design strategies between Taiwan and Japan

Because of different experience and cultural background, participants took distinct design strategies:

1. **Empathizing**. Most Taiwanese participants did not plan for preliminary exploration and observation of the field conditions and obtained basic information through open interviews and survey. In contrast, Japanese participants conducted interviews with local residents only after obtaining basic knowledge about the area and determining the investigation direction and design scope.

2. **Defining**. Specialized in industrial design, Taiwanese participants mainly proposed using a specific product/object for assistance or rehabilitation in disaster-prone areas. Japanese participants focused on more abstract aspects of culture and life and proposed cultural revitalization to recover local industries and inspire the people through action.

3. **Preliminary decision-making**. With regard to definition of the problem and proposition of solutions, Taiwanese participants tended to apply one-time design strategies, while Japanese participants used a sequential approach. Disasters and revitalization are not one-time events and require long-term attention. Therefore, during their proposals, students must clarify the requirements for the design objectives.

4. **Determining direction**. Taiwanese participants tended to propose single-object functional solutions, whereas Japanese participants preferred an activity-based affective approach. After 2-3 cycles of interaction with instructors and local residents, Taiwanese participants made certain adjustments and focused on experiential and narrative approaches to address issues and improvements. Japanese participants used a sequential approach and preferred solutions and improvements that could be implemented within a short period of time.

4. Conclusion

A workshop on disaster prevention and rejuvenation issues was the first to be conducted in Taiwan and, through interaction with the participants from Japan, revealed that the Japanese approach to design education was reality-orientated. The instruction of socially-responsible and practical design was promoted which focused on provision of immediate design solutions to the society and potential social contribution of design students. Design learning and teaching lacks empathy towards the victims of current events, regional observations, practical implementation, and design practice. Design proposals based solely on hypotheses may deviate greatly from actual conditions. The incorporation of more elastic methods into the design curriculum and interdisciplinary collaboration in practical implementation of design projects can help students be more flexible and utilize their knowledge in real life. This can increase the practical value of social design in Taiwan.

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Reference