

Sheng-Hung Lee Designing tomorrow's society



An enlightening interview with M.I.T. Ph.D. researcher and system and service designer Sheng-Hung, who conceives Design as a tool for social justice, and fairer communities, in societies where consumption is purposeful and longevity part of the equation.

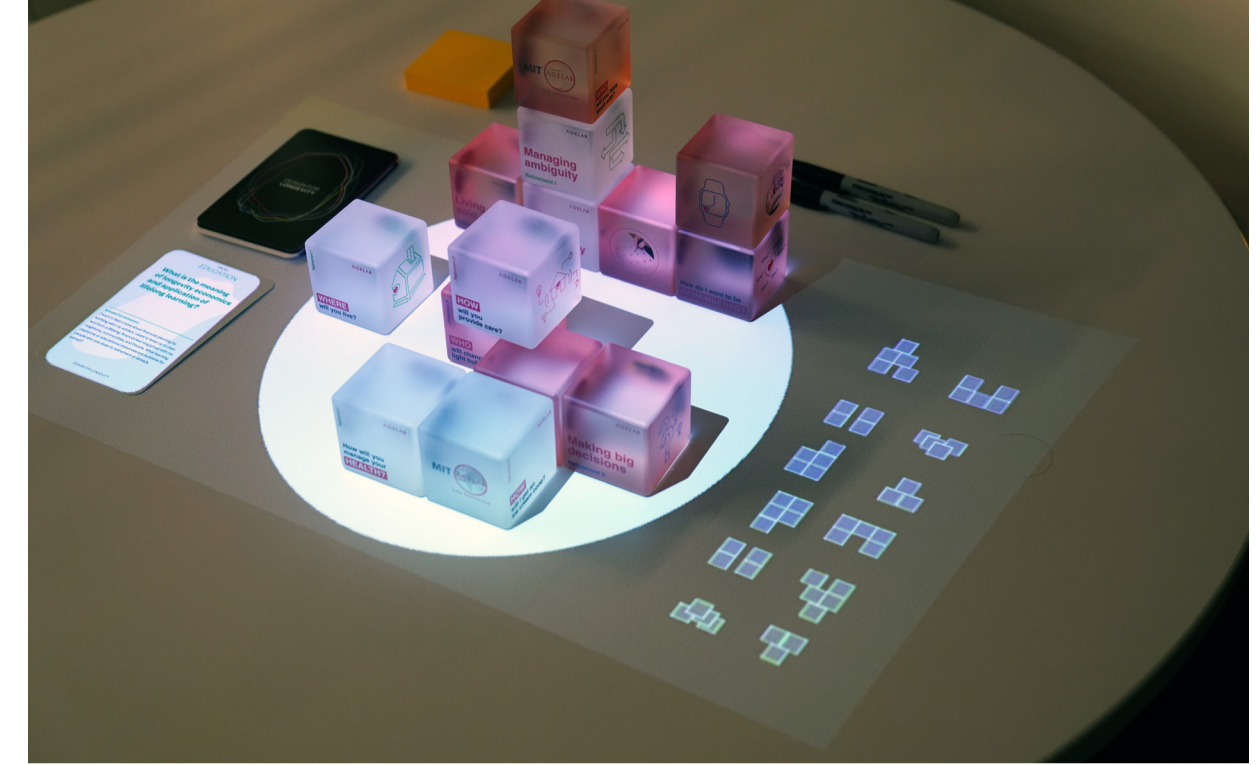
Looking at your impressive background and track record, it's hard to sum you up in one particular design approach. How would you personally define your design philosophy?

Everyone's design philosophy evolves at different stages of their lives. I was trained as a hard-core product designer and an electric engineer. My approach was very functional, very purposeful-driven. I had to solve problems, make things function. Only when I joined IDEO (one of the world's most influential design companies, Ed.), I learned about human-centred design. Now at M.I.T. I mainly focus on system design. We still need to understand people, and have empathy, but at the same time we have to think about how we can scale the impact of what we design, in terms of systems.

As a scholar of Human Behaviour, how does the study of our societies' lifestyles, especially in increasingly

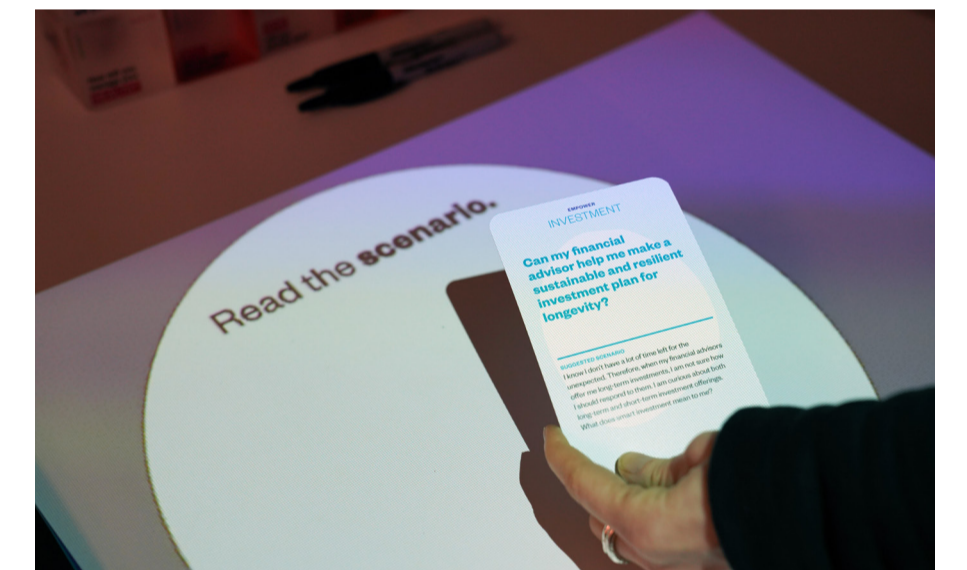
long-living populations, influence your approach to design?

Indeed my research now really focusses on design for longevity, shifting from the original idea of "designing for retirement": people live longer and want to better their quality of life, and live healthier, not just financially. We want to understand how we can achieve this as a system, what strategic investments need to be made. Rather than simply considering age, we'd rather look at the question in terms of different stages of life. Everyone has different stages in their own lives. How does that reflect on our design process? Retirement is somehow a fake concept. People still continue to live and have some purpose. We still want to achieve things and have some sort of fulfilment. Also, how do we address a multigenerational culture and society? These are the questions designers need to face. Today in Japan, for instance, a 75 year-old working in a convenience



Retirement is a fake concept, people continue to live and have purpose

USING VERY PHYSICAL OBJECTS SUCH AS CUBES, CARDS AND POST-IT NOTES CAN HELP THE SIMULATION OF INTANGIBLE CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES, AS IN THIS BOARD GAME CREATED BY M.I.T.'S AGELAB, DR. JOSEPH F. COUGHLIN, AND SOFIE HODARA





MOBILITY IS A CRITICAL FACTOR OF INDEPENDENCE FOR OLDER ADULTS: INDOOR FOOTWEAR IS POSSIBLY THE PRODUCT THAT IS MOST DIRECTLY CONNECTED TO THEIR WALKING BEHAVIOUR, AND CAN PREVENT THEM FROM FALLING AT HOME.

store is a pretty common sight. Another important issue is “ageism” (discrimination against older people, Ed.), how can we erase it? Are our fundamental societal infrastructures ready for this multi-generational culture? These issues now stand at the top of my design philosophy.

What difference do these considerations make when designing a new product for the world market?

I was trained as a design practitioner, and I like to make things tangible. Thinking about design for longevity, how do you project your future self? Hands-on, tangible experiences can enable people to express themselves, since we’re talking about abstract concepts, such as retirement, family, trust. So we try and make the conversation easier to navigate. We did this experiment with a mother and her daughter, and asked about their financial planning. The first thing is that they didn’t want to talk about it. That’s normal, it’s too private, too personal, and too sensitive. Then we decided to transform the conversation into playing a game using physical objects, such as cubes, to make it very concrete. They started to open up with me. So the mother started using these cubes to talk about her financial planning and philosophy, the daughter wanted to be part of the conversation. I’m originally from Taiwan, and my very traditional Chinese parents never talk about money. So you don’t know how they invest for their future, but also you don’t know how they can influence my generation, nor how I can teach the next generation. This is an interesting generation gap and cultural difference. Tangibility is a way to address all the different challenges and possibilities.

How can we, as a society, live longer and be sustainable?

Sustainability is a bit of a buzzword. It’s very trendy and everybody is talking about it, but we really need to change the fundamentals. For instance, we’ve just had coffee, using this paper cup. We would tend to think



About Sheng-Hung Lee

Sheng-Hung Lee Was Born In Taiwan In 1987. He Graduated In Electrical Engineering and Industrial Design at the National Cheng Kung University of Taiwan In 2013. Sheng Went on to earn a Masters Degree, then a Phd from Massachusetts Institute Of Technology at Cambridge, where he is currently working and conducting research on the impact of design on technology on society. Prior to that he was an Adjunct Professor at Shih Chien University in Taiwan and Fudan University in China. As an Industrial Designer he has worked with IDEO and Continuum. He is a member of the jury of the most prestigious design awards in the world and has won innumerable awards himself, along with countless accolades and acknowledgements.

shenghunglee.com



it’s recyclable since it’s made out of paper, but in fact it’s not because it’s been contaminated by the coffee. So we really need to change the way we think and act about it. Despite all the greenwash, our behaviour hasn’t changed. When designing any product, we should really have in mind people’s intentions and behaviours about it.

What is the role of care and finance in designing tomorrow’s society?

When talking about older adults, that of the caregiver seems to be a second tier role in today’s society. Our task is to design a system, a community where both the giver and the recipient receive better and fair consideration. In the US, the quality of care you receive as an elderly citizen depends on your income, while in other cultures and societies, like in Europe, or indeed Asia, governments play a more important role in protecting these weaker categories and guarantee access to care and support. As designers, we talk about “Design Justice” with a specific reference to social justice. How do we design an equitable system? This is a really important issue. Fundamentally, we need to change our mindset and our behaviour.

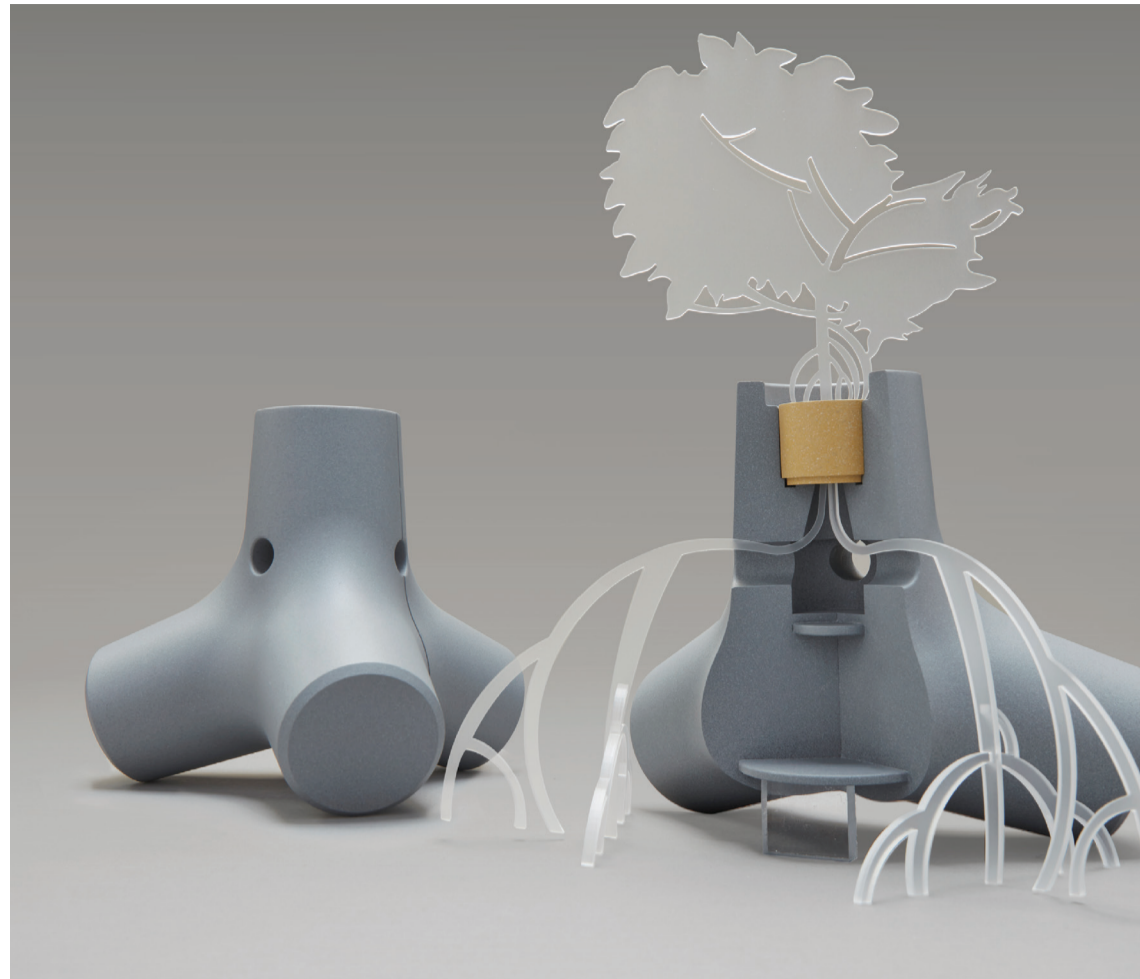
What about the starter-ups in life?

The focus here should be on financial literacy. At school you’re never taught how to manage your personal finances, how to invest, how to think about your future. Younger people generally tend to think that it’s too far away for them to worry about. People start to think about it when it’s already a bit late. Buying a car, or a home, need planning well in advance. With this project we want to talk to younger people about financial planning. I once had this interview with a service designer at Phillips. She was in her 40s, and for 30 years her dad had been her financial advisor. Now he wasn’t enough any more and she would turn to AI for online advice, but didn’t really trust it, and she didn’t have the resources for a professional advisor. We want to bridge that gap.

We’re too convenient, we’ve lost the essence of what we really need, because we purchase for the sake of purchasing



THE TETRAPOT IS A CONCRETE SEA DEFENCE HOLLOW ELEMENT CONTAINING MANGROVE AND OTHER PLANTS SEEDS, WITH THE AIM TO COMBAT THE DEFORESTATION OF COASTLINES.



"SMALL THINGS WITH A BIG HEART", A COLLECTION OF SIMPLE, MUNDANE YET SMART OBJECTS THAT MAKE EVERYDAY LIFE EASIER, AS A CONCRETE EXAMPLE OF THE IDA THAT THE BEST DESIGN IS NON-DESIGN.



What's your take on the evolution of household appliance design?

In the past, there was a lot of talking about IoT products. Data would get collected in order to understand users' preferences, so the privacy issue arose. On one hand we wanted the product to have our data in order to become smarter, but on the other hand we didn't want to share our data. Nowadays most appliances and consumer electronics companies talk about "platforms" whereby different products would connect with each other. Take my iPhone, it connects with my watch, and my tablet, and my laptop. But my GoPro camera doesn't connect with my android phone. I'd need to download an app for that. If you own the platform, you might own the market. It's not about single components or products. The future will be about integration.

What is, in your opinion, the importance of tradition and well-being in society's current trends?

To simplify, let's divide our societies into Eastern and Western: the approach to health, and well-being in general, is a lot more holistic in Eastern cultures. If I have a headache, according to traditional medicine in China or Taiwan, it might not have to do with something specific in my head, but with the balance of my entire being. A Western doctor would have made specific and very focussed investigations. There is no right or wrong in this, it's just different.

Care seems to be a key word both from a product and a cultural point of view. Do you agree?

Definitely, and the cultural aspect has a strong influence on the products we design. Take Muji, it's an Asian brand that represents a certain kind of philosophy through its products: no fancy names, the aim is that the products blend-in with our daily lives. At the other opposite, brands with a very strong personality, like Dyson, tell a story of technology and efficiency. In both cases, yet in a different way, caring can connect with the different products and the different cultures.

What are the major challenges facing our societies in the near future with regards to sustainability, in terms of product design?

We really have too many products. There is too much stuff in our lives, and that is one of the challenges we might have to address in the near future. Great designers will need to be great curators, in order to re-purpose the stuff we already have. We have so many products in our living environment. We've also become too convenient. We've lost the essence of what we really need. How do we curate our things in order to optimise our purchasing in a purposeful manner, and avoid to over-consume? The idea of curation is that we still create stuff, but more purposefully. In designing new retail experiences, the focus is much less on "new, bigger, iconic", and a lot more on curating a range of products customers need in the store.

Fundamentally, we need to change our mindset and our behaviours

Are we consuming too much, too fast?

We need to slow down. We're educating our children that they can have whatever they possibly can dream of, delivered instantly. We need to learn and teach patience again, a long-lost virtue, definitely out of fashion in today's world. In post-Covid society, everyone thinks that smart-work is wonderful, since one can work from home: it is not. It's horrible. We're turning into zombies, typing on our keyboards and talking to our computers all day, all alone. We need that in-person chat over coffee, we need that human contact. That's where we get our inspiration for innovation. At M.I.T. we're famous for technology, and we can design technology, but how do we do it "with human temperature"?

As a designer I dreamt of designing an iconic chair. The chair is possibly the symbol of ego-driven design, and I think design should be embedded in the environment. The best design is non-design. Most design masters want to leave their signature on their work. We need to learn to be more humble, especially since AI is now around. We now have new tools to help us in the process, but we have to know how to use them purposefully, so being a curator is much more important.

How can we ensure that Design positively impacts the domestic environment, also from a cultural perspective?

Understanding intentions is the key. I worked on a project that aimed to make M.I.T. labs carbon-neutral by 2030. It was an overwhelming task, but I started by talking to the people working in those labs to understand the purpose and the intentions and behaviours behind processes. The human side is very important, because that's what will determine whether any policy you might put in place will be followed or not. So if we want to have an impact on domestic life, we need to clearly understand motives and intentions first.