SHENG-HUNG LEE

Technology intersects Design: meet the visionary leader of Multidisciplinary Excellence

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Sheng-Hung Lee's Design Truth

"Sometimes, we are too purposeful to win the competition in a short time, but we forget the beauty and ability we have to see from our head to our heart to appreciate the things or experiences from ordinary to extraordinary."

About Sheng-Hung Lee

Learning and being continually fascinated and surprised are essential for distinguishing good from excellent and excellent from great. How do you decide what deserves your attention and time?

We need to train our eyes, how we see things from the heart. I mean can you really see through the intention behind most of the design artifacts? Most people, myself included, tend to see or understand things in a very transactional way. For example, getting a great education prepares you to make more money, since you might have a beautiful CV and all these achievements. Thus the goal is to become rich. The deeper meaning can also be interpreted as a good education can give us more options or know how to find or create more options to choose the lives we want.

Sometimes, we are too purposeful to win the competition in a short time, but we forget the beauty and ability we have to see from our head to our heart to appreciate the things or experiences from ordinary to extraordinary.

Sheng-Hung Lee was a co-instructor and teaching assistant of MIT graduate course: 11.547/SCM 287 Global Aging & The Built Environment co-teaching with Dr. Joseph F. Coughlin, Founder and Director of MIT AgeLab in 2022.

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Each project has its own requirements and terms. What significance do you place on observation? Do you observe in any particular way?

There might be no particular way for me. I know I like to identify the pattern, especially when I am in the early stage of research. Design can simply mean decoding a signal. How we find the patterns out of chaos to explore many possible solutions to validate our original hypothesis?

Is creativity in danger of becoming homogenized?

This is an interesting question to think about. Maybe so, if we only believe that technology or AI is the only answer that can give us better answers, quality of life, without believing in people. Homogenization can originate from the non-inclusive culture, linear problem-solving process, standardized and solution-based imagination, and other monotone contexts. For me, creativity is a very context-driven term. We probably need to have a more diverse, welcoming, accessible, people-centered belief as a foundation to ensure and protect the quality of creativity.

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When it comes to creativity and usability, how do you strike the right balance? Should usability be a requirement for design, or can something be designed purely for its own sake?

We can think of how we effectively measure creativity and usability. Do we need to measure both terms? In what context and for what reasons? Another aspect of this is to view them as two keywords across a spectrum of functionality. While we design a product in terms of thinking of its functionality, we tend to play the ratio of how much creativity versus usability.

When ideologies become a hindrance to planning, what holds diversity together? Is there a leadership aptitude and/or organizational capacity?

We can ask ourselves this question: In the realm of design or creativity, do we need to have ideologies or can we form ideologies? Diversity, ambiguity, and uncertainty are all characteristics of design and creativity.

Polarization seems essential to reality. Culturally, we often see it as negative: it is full of separation, anxiety, and distrust, so we try to resolve it. It is easy to see division, while the unified fabric of cultural expression is challenging to find. What do we need to change in the design approaches to value unity rather than divisions and conflicts?

I kind of appreciate the value and importance of having divisions and conflicts. It gives more possibilities for designers to push their limits and potential. I feel it's about identifying the balances that can cater to the situations or context.

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In translating ideologies into world-building, are designers also responsible for the clarity of their design philosophy?

If we use a metaphor to view ideologies as a person. I feel sometimes people have too strong personalities: having domain knowledge is not always a good thing. We want to protect ourselves to remain in a more authoritative position. We might want to put ourselves in a solid forfeit to hide our real feelings and opinions. We don't want to leave our comfort zone. These are exactly what could stifle innovation. We want to innovate and grow, so we need to be open-minded and transparent.

Simply put, we need to reconsider what is the essence of ideologies that we want to celebrate or build. Identify the core first and then we might need to invite people from other disciplines to join us to envision how we apply or integrate the latest domain knowledge, technologies, critical thinking, or even creative philosophies into ideologies.

What does reality means to you?

For me, reality is less about the facts or data. It's more about how we make sense of data. Can you, as a design professional, make a story based on the fieldwork research or information that you received? The reality is like expressing the processed and synthesized information.

Consider a future where humanity is nonreligious and no longer believes in soul immortality. However, the desire for immortality and the fear of death remain. Immortality depends on technology or social organizations. Do you think this hypothesis or the emergence of a new spirituality makes more sense?

I think one interesting area we can think about is how we store or rebuild our memories through applying emerging technologies. This could be related to the question around the emergence of a new spirituality.

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In the design education system, are happiness and joy considered significant educational elements? Are there any changes that need to be made?

I think education itself is under transformational change, especially for the design of the education system. I am glad the question here defines it as a system, which covers many aspects to consider from student experiences, teacher experiences, tools for design education, and methods applied to design education.

Making ethical and responsible decisions requires awareness and courage. Is this really the direction we're heading in? What's your approach to incorporating them?

Ethics and responsibility should be included when we make decisions. They should become part of our design culture or ritual. Maybe in the past, the design field didn't put too much emphasis or effort on this topic. Industries might care more about business, efficiency, and optimization.

Trust plays a crucial role in equality, but how does it arise?

We all know trust is important and I think trust plays a critical role beyond equality. We might hypothesize that it arises because of the synergy between relationships. If we can see through the essence of design, most of the problems are to figure out the relationship from the communication among people, the interaction with objects, and the engagement of the services.

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Limitations are an essential furnace for creativity, so why are we so afraid of them?

Limitations are essential for creativity, since designers need to know the constraints first. To put it simply, limitations should be part of the design brief before we start to design. It's an early stage of the creative process. Based on my personal experiences, I also feel that our current design education needs to put emphasis on celebrating how we deal with most of the constraints. How do we set up feasible plans?

Is coherence a powerful force?

Yes. But maintaining coherence or consistency will also cause a limitation. Sometimes we have to not only break the box, but also create our own box.

Does vulnerability play a role in growth and change?

I think showing vulnerability is not easy. For me, that also means to show my authenticity. To make people show that, we need to think about how to build trust and a safe environment to create the right conditions. Vulnerability definitely can indicate a critical moment when people are either growing or changing their lives. I consider design to be a life skill. Any moment that makes people grow and change we can also view as part of design.

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In what ways does the space designed for the elderly express meaning, significance, feelings, and sensations?

This question makes me think of the concept of aging-in-place. How can we prepare to have enough resources, money, services, environment, mobility, and communities to support us living at home? To realize the concept of aging-in-place, I think the term "space" in the question should mean more than just satisfying older adults in terms of functional needs like the actual environment design, but also their emotional support, such as feelings, meanings, and sensations.

Providing and receiving care needs to be rethought for the growing aging population. Could you tell us a little about your work and how you design for longevity?

The concept of Design for Longevity (D4L) is still an experimental design framework or thought process for me: how can we consider and prepare objects, a service, or an experience to evolve through time. Building on the top of the idea of design for sustainability, D4L cares about both material and emotional (intangible) sides.

A participant is interacting with one Longevity Planning Block (LPB)

Building on the top of the idea of design for sustainability, D4L cares about both material and emotional (intangible) sides.

In order to design for longevity, one must ask himself big existential questions about love, life, and death. Is that so?

I think the idea of Design for Longevity (D4L) is to let people from all walks of lives see the world through a new lens. Think about sustainability not only in the material world, but also in our mindset, consciousness, and behavior. Myself, Professor Sofie Hodara in the College of Arts, Media, and Design at Northeastern University, and MIT AgeLab to collaborate on the project—Design for Longevity: Sustainable Life-Centered Services and exhibited at Venice Innovation Design (VID) in 2023. The intention for this exhibition is to shift our focus from human-centered design to life-centered design by covering 12 areas of interest, such as mobility, investment, house, family, risk, education, community, finance, and future.

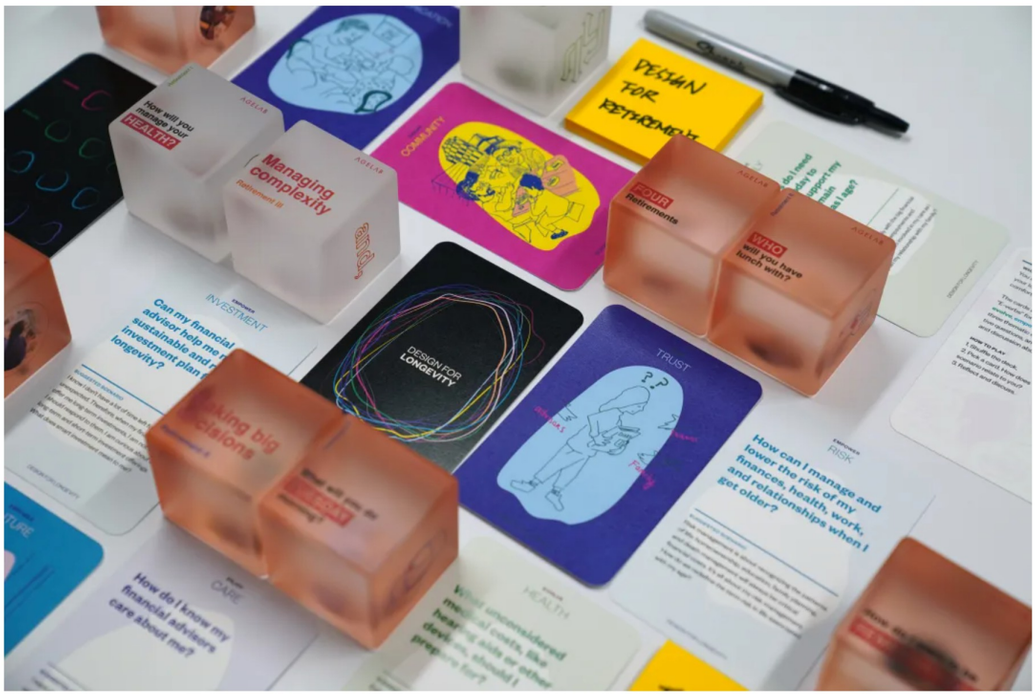
In order to design for longevity, how must design consider qualities such as patience, melancholy, and loneliness?

We need to consider more the people's emotional side of design. How possible do we design or curate people's feelings to make people feel informated and comfortable? Actually, we can not really design people's feelings. Instead, we are creating a user-friendly environment to unlock people's feelings and emotions respectfully and personally.

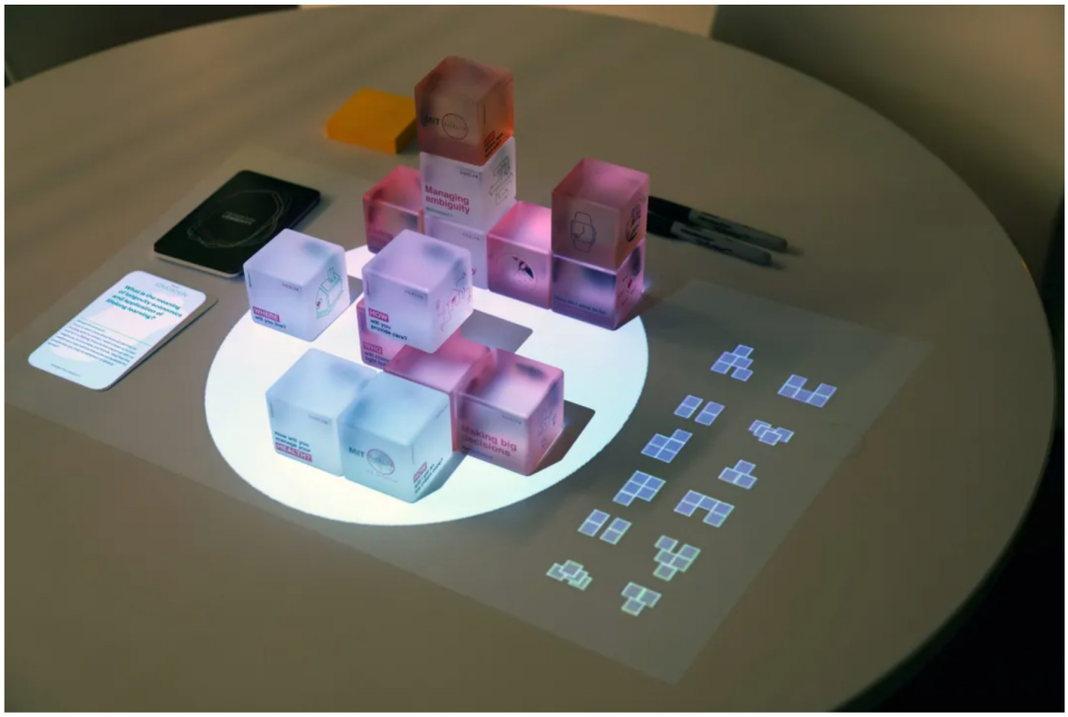
It also occurs to me that the brand is like MUJI. We know it's like a no-brand brand. MUJI is not an emotionless brand. It actually provides a natural platform to allow users/consumers to project themselves onto the products through using the products and vice versa.

When we discuss the concept of D4L, we definitely need to put more emphasis on considering the factors that will impact people's quality of life, such as patience, melancholy, loneliness, community, mobility, family, housing, and many more other human aspects we need to think of.

Sheng-Hung Lee presented his doctoral research about longevity coaching experience and service systems at MIT Preparing for Longevity Advisory Network (PLAN) Forum in 2023.



Longevity Planning Blocks (LPBs) and Design for Longevity (D4L) cards co-designed with Professor Sofie Hodara, Professor of College of Arts, Media, and Design (CAMD) at Northeastern University



Sheng-Hung Lee with MIT AgeLab team to conduct the Design for Longevity (D4L) with immersive technologies experiment in 2023.

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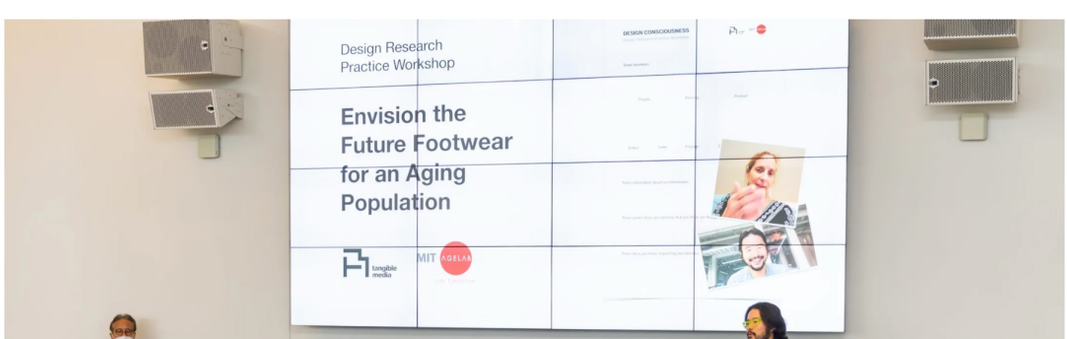
In order to design for longevity means to design also for unresolved anger, unresolved needs, and unresolved hopes. How do you address this?

This is a great question. I actually think Design for Longevity (D4L) is not created to solve all types of problems we have. D4L can be considered a new perspective, a lens to put on to revisit our daily lives or ordinary things by viewing sustainability and time as key factors.

Addressing questions is not the reason we proposed D4L. I feel most of the time, people have a strong stereotype viewing designers as problem-solvers. I think the impact that designers can make relies on how we position or integrate design within the organization's structures or processes. If we can put D4L at a strategic level within organizations, including schools, companies, studios, and enterprises, we might amplify the power and influence of D4L. From the top down, flow can be relatively easy to push and create momentum.

Inherent defects in humans include an urge to dominate. Could you share an alternative reality project you're passionate about?

With the projects I am passionate about, usually I can sort of foresee the impact and it can be scaled and replicated. I believe design is an application of science. It needs to be applied and manufactured.



Sheng-Hung Lee collaborated with Professor Hiroshi Ishii, Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at the MIT Media Laboratory to host a design research workshop—Envision the Future Footwear for an Aging Population in 2022.

Sheng-Hung Lee's Footwear Design Exhibition in the MIT Wiesner Student Art Gallery sponsored by The Council for the Arts at MIT (CAMIT), 2022.

Sheng-Hung Lee proposed eight footwear design prototypes for an aging population based on his experimental research in 2022.

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Change is often thwarted. Is there anything that really allows brilliant ideas to flourish?

Change is often thwarted because it is hard. Changing is not easy and most of the time is painful. This is where the nutrition of innovation comes in. Change acts like stones in the water. There are big and small, depending on which section of the river we look at. Is it the upper side? The lower side? Or the middle? The flow of water can represent the millions or thoughts of ideas we come up with. Sometimes, there are too many stones and they block the water to break the flow of the river. Sometimes, there are no stones in the river so we might experience the small water flow. Change can make brilliant ideas stick, shape ideas, and make ideas thrive and shine!

Will design always act as a reaction to ideology or can it be used as a tool to test and improve our ideologies?

I think both are equally important. I consider design as an application science that requires both theory and practice. Design definitely can be viewed as tools and also depending on which context we are talking about. My career path started from viewing and learning design as a useful set of tools and gradually transformed to apply design as a creative process and communication tool. We actually need both parts: design acts as a reaction to ideology and also can be used as a tool to test and improve our ideologies.

Currently, the situation is so dire that it could be the right time for radicalism at this point in time. Is it possible for that to happen?

If we can ensure people understand the intention or the purpose of design, we might erase or slow down situations like the rise of radicalism. Beautiful things take time. I think design is a series of interconnected beautiful things, services, and experiences.

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Security comes from similarity. Different creates dynamism, creativity, and danger. How do you balance similarity and difference?

We are discussing the degree of diversity. Low diversity can mean that we receive many similar solutions or ideas. High diversity can demonstrate many other possible futures. I love to have controlled diversity, which echos the assumption that security comes from similarity. I feel like if we don't have a certain degree of control or security, it's a bit challenging to predict or expect the whole design process by managing a series of converging and diverging processes.

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Designers get attached to their methodologies. We talk about creativity, challenges, and getting out of our comfort zones, but do we constantly create them?

I think design methodologies have also evolved as we applied them to actual projects. For example, the iconic Human-Centered Design (HCD) Venn diagram proposed by IDEO covers three sectons: the desirability of users, the feasibility of technologies, and the viability of business. We can find many design projects or socially impactful projects that have successfully adapted HCD into their own process by following the principles: inspiration, ideation, and implementation: d.school has evolved its own HCD five-step process: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

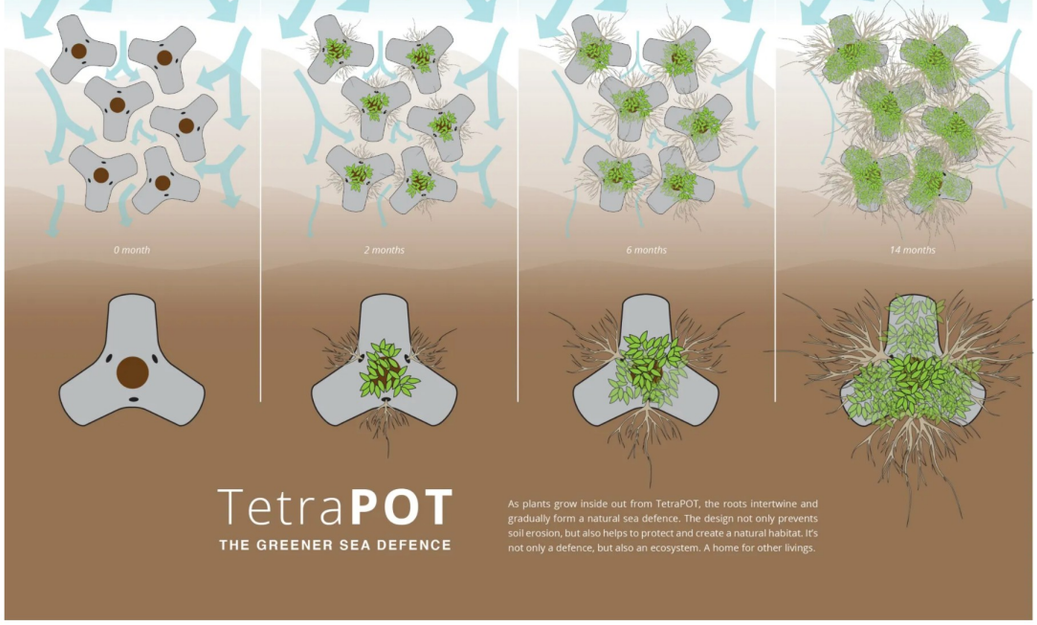
What is the biggest misconception designers have when it comes to designing the invisible? What the missing points?

One way to think about design for the invisible is "service." As a trained product and industrial designer, I tended to only focus on tangible artifacts. People easily overlook the importance of services and experiences.

We need to consider not only the products, but also the services around the products, and the experiences that are delivered by a series of curated products and services.

As professional designers, we need to cultivate a capability to bring tangibility across not only different types of projects, but also various stages of the creative process. It helps us gain holistic views to appreciate possible aspects of design solutions.

TetraPOT is a sea defence sustainable system made of concrete, organic materials, and plants. The project was designed by Sheng-Hung Lee and Wan Kee Lee and supported by IDEO in 2016.


0 month
2 months
6 months
14 months
TetraPOT
THE GREENER SEA DEFENCE
As plants grow inside out from TetraPOT, the roots intertwine and gradually form a natural sea defence. The design not only prevents soil erosion, but also helps to protect and create a natural habitat. It's not only a defence, but also an ecosystem. A home for other livings.

TetraPOT
THE GREENER SEA DEFENCE

DESIGN PROFILE
Dimension
1.5m X 1.5m X 1.5m (L X W X H)
Weight of the project
1 ton
Materials Used
Concrete, Decomposable Material, Soils, and Copper
Product Distribution
TetraPOT is currently available on the seashore, because sea defenses are normally manufactured at the coastal line where they need be placed. Since we are based in Shanghai, at the moment we will try to cooperate with the Shanghai municipal government

As professional designers, we need to cultivate a capability to bring tangibility across not only different types of projects, but also various stages of the creative process.

While design can change the world, it can also be arrogant and self-aggrandizing. What are your thoughts on it?

I think it can be a healthy thing as long as it's not hurting others. On the flip side, arrogance or self-aggrandizing is another way to express how people perceive the world around them. We respect people who have their own freedom and rights to experience and enjoy the world, but we also need to learn how to respect people and respond to the needs of people.

Which design principles will endure regardless of technological advances?

In Human-Centered Design (HCD), I think it's empathy. How do we think in the shoes of users or key stakeholders to come up with solutions? I think identifying, considering, and solving users' desirabilities and pain points are always critical as timeless design principles.

Design criteria include working with and for dignity. How might the design change when it is about new or evolved humans?

Working with and for dignity for me is like a timeless design principle. How do you create a respectful and friendly environment for and with people? How do we protect people's values through design?

Working with and for dignity for me is like a timeless design principle.

Is there a radical change that designers can make to address the disconnect between people and the planet?

Design for Longevity (D4L) can be a useful framework and perspective to think about the bonding between people and the planet. It's easy to tie this to the material cycle or sustainability, but we actually need to consider the circular side of design: procurement, material, prototyping, production, manufacturing, and reuse. The concept of curricular economics can connect with the idea of longevity economics. D4L is to add the design component to our life cycle to help us reflect on what life-centered design means for us.

Whenever you look at something closely, designers – and all humans – will find some flaw. Nature is the only exception in that it is the condition for all other things. It is not manipulated, it cannot make mistakes because mistakes arise from a mismatch between what was intended/should have been done/should have been done and how things actually turn out. Is moving from a subjectivity that interprets to a shared, intersubjective experience increasingly essential?

Great question. For me, as a design professional, do we have the ability to zoom in and out fluently? Can we foresee the whole picture before we criticize or find the flaw?

Language shapes how we understand the world around us and, consequently, how we act. Is it time to rethink design language?

Yes. We should actually focus on design language more. Recently, I translated the book Dieter Rams: The Complete Works published by Phaidon Press from English into Chinese. It helps me better understand that language is a beautiful tool for designers to express creativity, ideas, and processes. We overlook and underestimate the power of abstraction and expression.

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As designer, the pathway of our purpose is through the perfection of our role?

I used to be a perfectionist in my own design work. For example, I closed the door and hid myself in a corner of the space to make my sketches, CADing, renderings, and even prototyping as close to perfect as possible.

When I worked for IDEO and Continuum, two world-class design consultancies, I started to learn that it is less about perfection for the individual, and more about collaboration and communication as a team.

There is no conflict between perfection and collaboration. The key relies on how you create an accessible and open-ended platform to invite your team or clients along with you in the creative process.

We are entering an era of redefined innovation. It seems that everything needs to be changed in a real, lasting, and meaningful way now. What is your starting point?

The term "redefined innovation" is interesting to me. I think people tend to think of innovation in capital letters, "INNOVATION," which is like transformational change. In reality, most solutions are more like "innovation." They are incremental. They are gradual. They are slow and might be time-consuming.

I feel as design professionals, we need to get inspiration from "innovation" in our daily lives to accumulate our creative energy and sources preparing for "INNOVATION" to come. It can fail, but we can still learn from it.

Do narratives still have the power to support increasingly aware choices? Alternatively, are they often used to induce desire only to have something come true?

Narratives can be interpreted as one type of storytelling. I think it can definitely support increasingly aware choices. For sure, it can also be applied to induce desire. I feel for a design professional, the power of language is always overlooked. We need to be mindful about how we use our language to shape the stories we want to have on the products.

I think it can definitely support increasingly aware choices.

What effects can artificial intelligence have on our capacity to feel love, joy, suffering, and creative and empathy qualities?

AI can amplify our ability to perceive the experience and knowledge around us in a rational and linear way, because we can always use scientific ways to detect bugs or coding problems to fix them or improve them. In terms of feeling love, joy, suffering, creativity, and empathy qualities, I don't think AI can enhance these qualities. These are touched by people's emotions and our inner selves. It takes time to accumulate these powerful and memorable stories.

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Can technology effectively connect communities?

I think how we apply technology is like a double-edged sword that can push or pull communities. Do we discuss how technology can effectively connect or isolate communities? We can use Zoom or online communication software as a most relevant example for most people. During the pandemic, people thought it was a very useful and safe way to connect people.

In the post-pandemic era, we might still consider Zoom useful and convenient communication software for online meetings, and virtual talk, and even apply it as a research tool. Does that mean that online communication software like Zoom makes efficiency more important than in-person meet-ups? Do we want the majority of our working and lifestyle to become virtual and screen-based? How do we envision our human communication in the near future?

Humans create objects to improve their lives. Once we reach the functional aspect of the object, we forget why it was created and for whom. How do you design artifacts that are able to evolve with the user and take into account their emotional aspect?

This question enables me to think about another question: How do we design products, services, and experiences with human temperature? One aspect I am thinking of is to use data as fuel to inform most products that are under the category of IoT (Internet of Things) or we can simply say "smart products."

Especially now in the time of AI, most design artifacts should evolve with users in terms of their habits, behaviors, decision-making process, and even their lifestyles. Maybe the key for us to think about is why we want to let these “smart” design artifacts grow with us. Does it matter more than spending time with your families, kids, or neighbors?

As a designer, how do you create products that blend attention, care, and dedication with functionality?

Do we want to have products with features that can blend attention, care, and dedication with personal functionality? I feel a bit scared and worries about the products that we are going to build in the future. Maybe we can think about what is the boundary line between smart products, robots, and creatures.

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You switched from human-centered design to humanity-centered design. This involves a type of observation that takes complexity into account. “Seeing” takes courage, right?

In one of my design projects: Design Consciousness – Small Things with Big Heart , I discussed three different layers of seeing: 1. Observation: what you see, 2. Consideration: what you perceive, and 3. Interpretation: what you conceive. Three layers can help us understand do we just see, do we understand, or do we see through?

Normally, we see the object through the reflection of light. It’s a very skin-deep level. Can we see the same object from various perspectives? Further, can we not only see the same object from different perspectives, but also form our unique insights?

Sheng-Hung Lee's designer-in-residence project: Design Consciousness—Small Things with Big Heart, was sponsored by EMMA and the German government in 2019.

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There are multiple realities that coexist, sometimes conflicting, and it's increasingly difficult to tell what's real. Influencers, deep fakes, AI posing as humans, and humans posing as AI. How should we design meaning amid these contradictory realities?

What's real? What's unreal? For me, real means authenticity and commitment. Do you really love design and are you passionate about this field? When you work on a design project, you easily forget about time, cost, and all the challenges. Challenges are always part of the design process and they are critical and essential.

Today, products no longer reflect their origin but are a product of global production. However, nature does not ship worldwide. What if everyday objects echoed nature's processes to emerge as local products?

The concept of product design for most people could include the products you hold in your hands or touch or feel. For me, the concept of product design is to consider it in a suitable context. For example, you won't expect a chef to use an umbrella instead of a knife in the kitchen. Design in context is important. We can ship the same product globally, but we don't want to replicate the same user experience around the same products.

Know-how refers to skills related to meaning, understanding, and awareness. This knowledge, however, is trivialized by our economy of mass production. Is it possible that our hands, which unite head and heart, will no longer serve us?

Our head, hands, and heart are part of our body that connect to our work and life experiences. We have to view them as whole interconnected systems and indispensable to absorb and acquire new knowledge or experiences.

The knowledge to some degree can be manufacturable, such as if we standardize junior high school curriculum content. But for design knowledge, I think it contains more around personal work and life experiences that are hard to mass produce in our economic systems, since everyone is born and raised in different countries and families.

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Could you tell me what changed your perspective about design that made you think differently?

Changing perspectives for me is like thinking about each transitional moment in life. For example, finding a new path to walk back home, changing dates and habits, and learning new skills can be as parts of life experiences. These different trasitional moments regardless of big or small enrich our life experiences that might enable us to think differently and confidently.

Conflicts are more common in our lives than harmony, but understanding disagreements leads to real understanding. In your design process, how do you reconcile these opposing forces?

Disagreements with evidence or research are a great way to create a condition for innovation. We might want to replace the word "disagreement" with "different perspectives." Human-Centered Design (HCD) looks for meaningful, respectful, and enjoyable solutions that come from many different angles of consideration and discussion.

As a designer dealing with complexity, do you consider yourself a designer, a writer, a psychologist, or a philosopher?

It's a mix of all of them. I think the beauty and the challenges of being a designer dealing with complexity and systematic challenges is that we need to learn how to put on different hats to unlock different parts of our potential. Also in the era of transformation, we need to think less as an individual. The times to celebrate hero design have been in the past. Instead, we need to learn how to make collective decisions and teamwork. Teamwork makes the dream work.

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When reconnecting with our internal navigation system, we often start with broad, general questions. Where should we start? How about changing one small thing in our daily routine? What routine gives you well-being?

Sharpening our observation skills is the key: how we observe people through interacting, having a meal, going to see a movie, or even just seeing them from a distance. I feel to cultivate the ability to observe things, people, process, services, or experiences are a type of life skill that everyone needs.

We fear failure because we desire validation. Is there something you are afraid of?

Embracing ambiguity is the key to survival in today's transformational environment. Everything nowadays is changing so fast that everyone needs to learn how to adapt, evolve, and transform. And not just with technologies, but also our working and living lifestyle, the food and drinks we consume, and the new experiences have are all part of this complicated world.

The only change is to change ourselves behaviorally and even spiritually. Human nature tends to look for a stable environment and safety to survive. However, this is not the case in the realm of innovation. For the sake of enhancing and fostering creativity, I think failure and change are both our fuel to move forward.

When you have an *aha!* moment, do you have a way that you celebrate?

I am trying to think of my aha! moment. It seems like it's not that obvious to me, since the solutions evolve gradually. It's more like incremental innovation rather than disruptive innovation.

I prefer to think about how we accumulate our creative energy in daily life, such as how we establish creative rituals in teams, inspire individuals, boost self-confidence, and maintain an open-minded culture. I am passionate about the idea of o creating the "right" ingredients to have more aha! moments.

I prefer to think about how we accumulate our creative energy in daily life, such as how we establish creative rituals in teams, inspire individuals, boost self-confidence, and maintain an open-minded culture.

What mission are you currently on?

I am working on a project to promote the concept of Design for Longevity (D4L). The idea originally came from design for retirement. How do we better prepare our financial health to make a strategic investment? How do we improve our financial literacy? How do we improve our quality of life through the lens of longevity? It's a new perspective to think about design for sustainability.

What's next for Sheng-Hung Lee?

Since I passed my Ph.D. qualifying exam at MIT, I am focusing on my experiment. Meanwhile, I'm looking for educational opportunities or positions where I can contribute my academic research skills and industrial experience to cultivate our next generation of designers.

INTERVIEW
October 18, 2023
Interview by **Michela Ventin**

INFO
Sheng-Hung Lee
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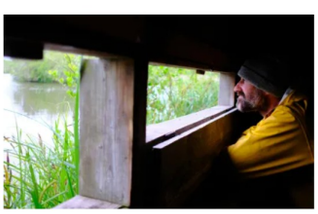

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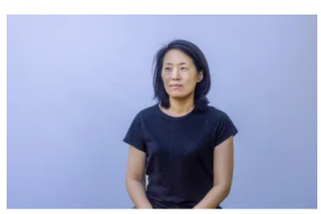

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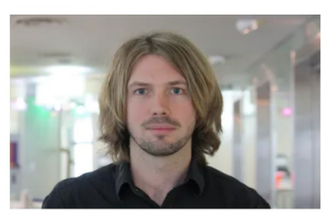

JOHN DAVIES

Economics, data, tech research fellow on the creative & digital economy at Nesta

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