Through Designers' Eyes — Design Inspirations from Daily Life

Sheng-Hung Lee

MIT AgeLab Researcher, MIT xPRO Course Experience Designer, IDSA Boston Vice Chair

I. Building Design Confidence and an Eastern Design Value System
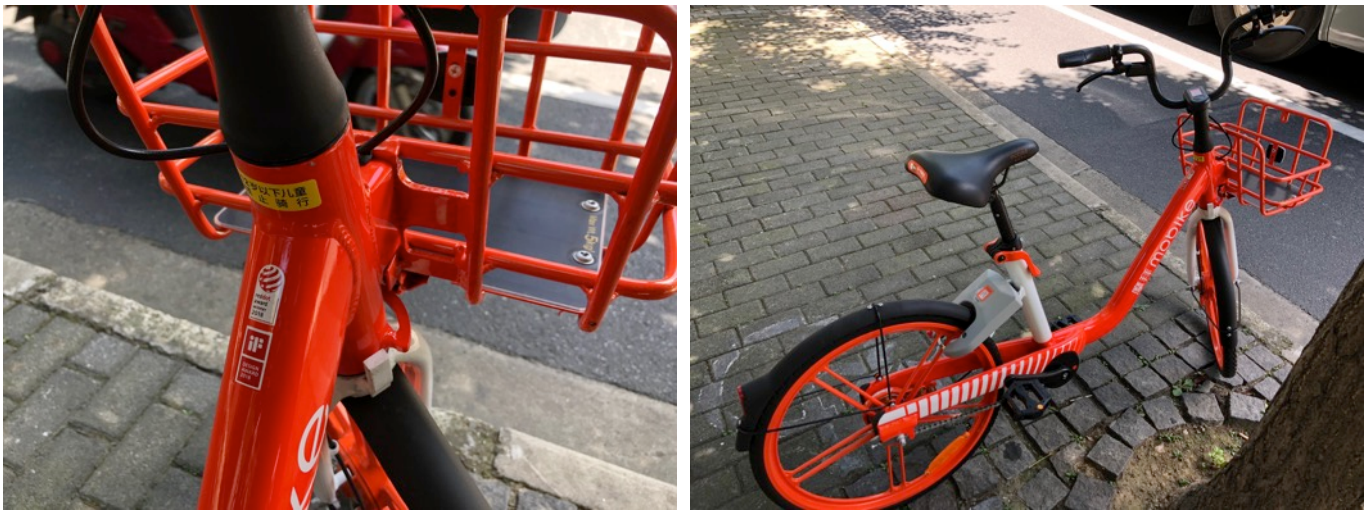

Figure 1 – New MOBIKE design
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

The sight of the new-generation MOBIKE made my heart swell with excitement and expectations, but as I was about to fling myself on the bike for a test ride, I spotted two design-award labels affixed on the bike frame—Red Dot Design Award and iF Design Award. I didn't give it much thought at the time, as I was too engrossed in the test ride to think about anything else. But when I pondered it over later, the two labels gave me some scope for reflection on confidence in products, and the Western design evaluation system. The key to designing bikes or almost any products is to provide consumers with the best possible user experience. To do that, design teams should produce the best designs out of the best materials. And this is what you do when you are confident about your products.

As for putting award labels on product packages or even directly on products, this may serve as a way for start-up companies or brands to market their products in that it can quickly earn consumers' trust and recognition. But for MOBIKE, an already well-recognized mass transit alternative, I think it is best to let its product design and quality speak for themselves. Whether the final product should be adorned with award labels, I think it is rather a matter of opinion.

The talk of design confidence leads naturally to reflection on the Western design evaluation system. We all know that many scientific phenomena in nature may be guided by a general rule and theory, but I like to think of aesthetics and design more as

products of location-specific ideas and different cultural values. Eastern and Western aesthetics may partially overlap but are by no means identical, as do Eastern and Western art history. The current discussion makes only a very rough distinction between the East and the West, and can be further explored and broken down into smaller categories. Given the differences in cultural contexts, why are we content with putting products designed for Eastern consumers under the Western design evaluation system, for example, by participating in major international design-award competitions?

We can still maintain an open mind and attitude to different advice on our design works, but we should not expect too much or lack in self (Eastern) awareness and confidence. On the other hand, how should we establish a design evaluation system exclusively for the East in our capacity as Eastern designers? I think the system must be like no other. As design is so much intertwined in people's life, culture, customs, habits and ethnic groups, it will be very meaningful to create a platform that helps Asians evaluate design works. In recent years, I have come across China's Red Star Design Award, Taiwan's Golden Pin Design Award, Hong Kong's DFA Award, Korea's K-Design Award, and of course Japan's time-honored G-Mark (Good Design Award). These platforms have all adjusted their evaluation criteria and visions to reflect the cultural contexts of design in Asia.

Building design confidence and a design value system is essentially about the human factor involved—whether design teams are confident enough about their products, whether users appreciate the efforts that has gone into the design when using the products, whether products can offer a perfect use experience, and whether our society has turned for the better because of the high quality of design works and consumers. Human-centeredness, when viewed from a social perspective, should start first from individuals and then move on to influence people around you and then a social community even, in an ever-enlarging ripples of impact towards a better design value system more suitable for the East.

II. Design Is a Natural Act that Requires Empathy

Figure 2 – Front-desk experience designed for children at a hotel
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

This is the front desk of the hotel I stayed in when I was on a business trip in Wuxi. Nothing out of the ordinary at first glance, but closer scrutiny showed an additional small staircase. I was wondering about the reasons for placing the stairway and whether it is designed for people with disabilities or for other uses, until I saw the sign right on the front desk. It turned out that the stairway was designed for children in the hope that they can have an equal opportunity to interact with the front desk staff. Just Imagine if we learn to look from a child's perspective at the many things that we have taken for granted in our daily life, or should we say,

adults' daily life: leave the home at eight o'clock, start to work at nine o'clock, take a one-hour break at noon, and so on and so forth, with an array of rules and routines to keep us boxed in.

How will things be different if we learn to see the world through children's eyes? This reminds me of an old Japanese TV show called "World Seen at 110 cm", a fountain of design inspirations for me. In this vein, I would like to share an interview with a parent-child group when I was working with my team to design an innovation space for the Shanghai Library last year. In that interview, when I asked a child what she liked about the library space, the answer I got was the circular sponge chair. When I asked why, she said, "I like it that I can stretch out my limbs when I sit down, which gives me the feeling of flying." It turns out that children see the act of sitting down very differently from how adults generally seat themselves. Not only have I learned from children to imagine new things about products, but these new imaginations have inspired and helped me to appreciate diverse interpretations of everyday life by different people in their ever diversified roles.

Empathy is an embodiment of Human Centered Design. I can think of no stronger example than the height difference between the platform and the high-speed rail, subway or other forms of mass transit, which, though it can be easily overcome in most cases, will pose challenges to people struggled with luggage, the physically challenged or seniors. We should ask ourselves whether we can always have empathy towards others by putting ourselves in their shoes. In addition to empathy, what counts more is that designers and their teams treat each user with care. I call it the design concept of "Humanity Centered Design", of which the core idea is design with care.

Last year, when I was working with my team to remake and redesign the Innovation Space of the Shanghai Library, one of the design concepts for the help desk was to allow the children and librarians to have enough interaction and eye contact. So we chose the easiest way to do that by adjusting the height of the help desk. The setting of the help desk in the space also embodied Humanity Centered Design, which used to be arranged at the entrance where the librarian's vision was limited to the entrance and exit areas, rather than the whole space. The new planning, however, places the help desk right at the center of the new space, allowing the librarians to keep their eyes and ears wide open just like a proud guardian of the space. It is my hope that the librarians are no longer cramped in the narrow blocks of the help desk, but are able to truly integrate into the space and get closer to the readers. I think that the innovation and creativity advocated by the Shanghai Library Innovation Space are not only reflected in the space design, but in the "people" inside, exposing librarians, readers and anyone else to kindheartedness and benevolence.
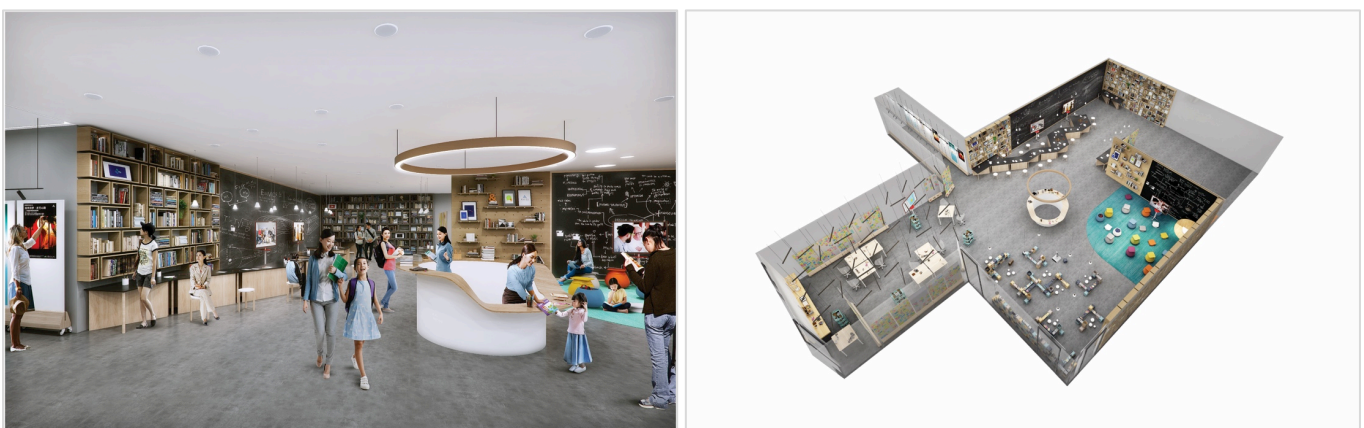

Figure 3 – Blueprint of the Innovation Space of the Shanghai library.
In the bird's view (right) of the space, the round object at the center is the help desk.
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

III. People-, Product- and Environmentally-friendly Universal Design

Figure 4 – User-unfriendly experience in barrier-free space
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

Once when I visited a shopping mall on my day off, I came across this sign for barrier-free space at the entrance of the first floor, which read: "For accessible bathroom, please go to 8F." I found this gesture towards people with disabilities rather sweet at first, but on second thought: "Nah, that's not right, why do people with disabilities have to go to the higher floor to use the bathroom?" Though with the best of intentions, this design has failed to take people's real needs and feelings into account. This reminds me of the term – universal design that dated back to the 1950s, when people began to notice the difficulties faced by disabled people and the term "barrier-free design" caught on. The term later evolved to "accessible design", referring to a design process meant to move beyond products to produce environments accessible to people who have difficulties in walking.

In 1987, American designer Ronald L. Mace began to use the term "universal design", which, if simply put, is to meet every man's needs as much as possible. A good example of universal design in our everyday life is barrier-free access facilities. How many barrier-free ramps are there in the picture below which I took in a northern city in China? Nine in total, which means that it will be very difficult for people with disabilities to move up or down on these ramps if there is no one to assist them. I recall that whenever I go to large exhibitions, there are always long lines of women queuing outside bathrooms. The unsex bathroom is also a great example of universal design that may be part of the solution to the queuing problem. In fact, plenty of universal design examples can be found in our daily life, some great and some awful, but they all represent our efforts to create a more friendly environment.

Figure 5 – User-unfriendly design of barrier-free access facilities
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

I think that in the future, or better yet, in today's design world, the concept of universal design should be a natural part of the design process. Universal design should not be treated as an independent design concept and category, as it is a prerequisite that demands to be met. In the "people-oriented" thinking, we may only be able to touch on the narrower design concept of universal design between products and people, which is just a beginning at most. What counts more is the relationship between people, products and the environment on one hand and universal design on the other hand. Any creature can't be disconnected from the environment they live in, and humans are no exception. So what does universal design mean for the environment? Sustainable design may be one of the answers to the question.

We coexist with the environment and influence each other. Designers must incorporate environmental protection considerations when creating products or solving problems, but the responsibility should not be designers' alone. Imagine if we use disposable tableware for the sake of convenience, choose private cars over public transit to save time, and over-order food when dining with friends to save face.

These inadvertent personal actions generate demand, and with enough demand there is a potential market that will spawn competitive business activities. Designers design and produce goods to meet the needs of only a small part of the various business activities. In fact, the three elements – people, products and the environment are closely related to universal design. Everyone on the planet has the responsibility to make our environment sustainable, so that we can continue to thrive and consume, unimpeded.

IV. Overdesign

Figure 6 – overly designed service experience
(Source: Sheng-Hung Lee)

I once dinned out at a popular hot-pot restaurant. When a table was finally available after a long wait, I ordered two cans of JDB herb tea. A waiter brought me the drinks in a while, and very carefully put them down on the table (as pictured above), which got me to imagine all the possible ways to go about enjoying the drinks:

- Wipe with alcohol pads, open a can, and drink directly without a straw.

- Wipe with alcohol pads, open a can, and drink with a straw.

- Wipe with alcohol pads, open a can, and drink out of a glass.

- Do not wipe with alcohol pads, open a can, and drink directly without a straw.

- Do not wipe with alcohol pas, open a can, and drink with a straw.

- Do not wipe with alcohol pads, open a can, and drink out of a glass.

- Wait for the waiter to open a can, and drink directly without a straw.

- Wait for the waiter to open a can, and drink with a straw.

- Wait for the waiter to open a can, and drink out of a glass.

Of course there are more ways to go about enjoying the drinks. And this is a bit of an extreme example, which reminds me of the smash-hit hot-pot chain "Haidinao", where customers waiting for tables can have free manicures, massages, or watch movies, etc., which far exceeds the expectations of most people. While it is important to uphold the service concepts of customers first and that the customer is king, all the design flourishes will become irrelevant and redundant if you do not take to heart people's needs under the guidance of "human-centered" design, or worse, cause problems for customers.

Good design is not about piling up new things or creating more social problems. Good design should be a seamless presence, which will not make itself felt by users but, whenever the need arises, it will appear and give a helping hand to whoever needs it. Without Thought, a concept promoted by designer Naoto Fukasawa, has a similar ring to it. Without Thought is a natural process where designers turn their daily observations into some kind of insights and enlightenment. Design is more like a practical means or a tool to help communicate.

In my opinion, over design for me is still at the stage of exploration – there is no right or wrong. For example, when Xiaomi set out to build an ecosystem, it went through a period of overly design, which I believe will happen to any other start-ups, e.g., by starting off with a vision to do everything before finally choosing to go in the direction that is "good for users and businesses". If the design is "excessive", it is even more crucial to whittle it down to its core to best Wow and impress its users.