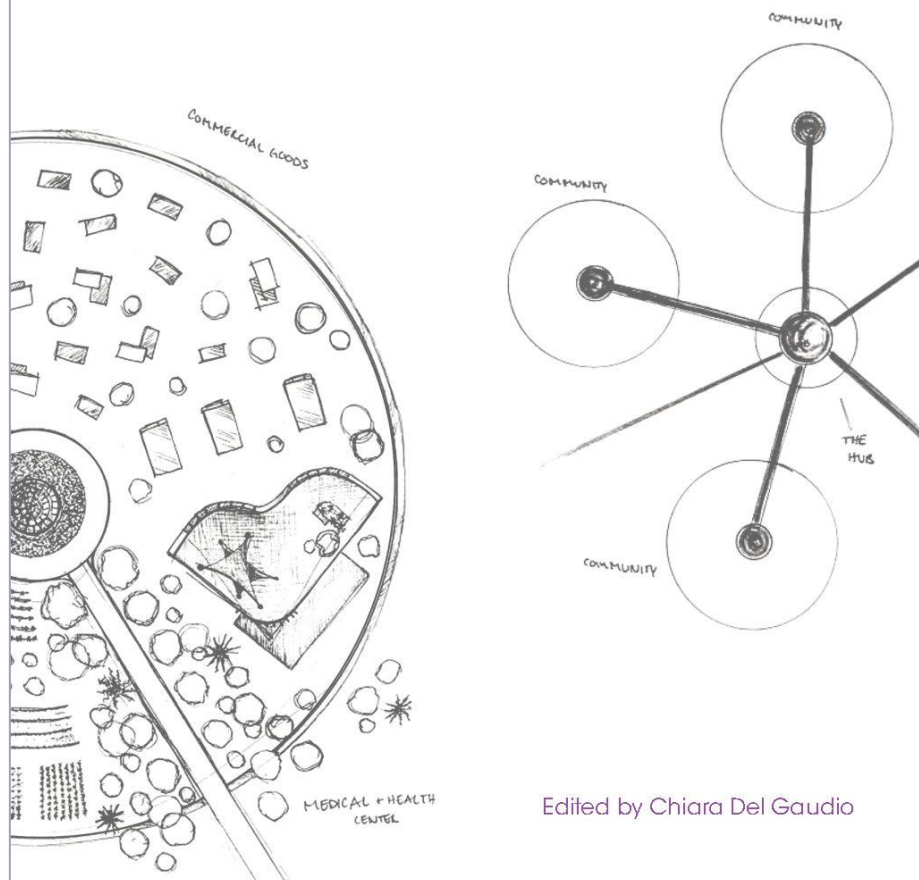


Section excerpted from:

# INSIGHTS

4th-Year Students' Reflections on  
Design for Social Innovation



Edited by Chiara Del Gaudio

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## Design for Social Innovation in and With Traditional Communities

DESIGN - SOCIAL INNOVATION - TRADITIONAL - CULTURE

Design for social innovation seeks to develop meaningful social practices that improve on previous ways of doing or interacting (DESI, 2016). It works by identifying potential new ways of doing things, testing these ideas and evaluating outcomes; the outcomes of social innovation contribute to building social fabric, reducing environmental impact and regenerating common goods (DESI, 2016). One positive outcome of design for social innovation explored in this paper is the revitalization of cultural practices and traditional craft in indigenous or traditional communities achieved by empowering communities through design. In actual fact, design can be used to develop new ways of thinking about traditional craft, cultural practices, and their local economy (Yang, 2015). After working on a certain method of doing for generations, it can be hard to move forward and adapt cultural practices for modern-day relevance (Yang, 2015). The design experience undertaken by students working alongside villagers in the Foothills of Taiwan to rejuvenate their traditional rush-weaving industry, discussed by Yang (2015) in “Industrial Design Students Design for Social Innovation: Case Study in a Taiwanese Village”, is summarized and discussed here to give insight into how design knowledge can positively influence and empower the livelihood of traditional ways of life.

### The Role of Design in Revitalizing Traditional Cultural Practices

Everyone is a designer in their own way. Professional designers are trained to design for other people and have traditionally done so through empathetic design and user testing (Sander & Stappers, 2008). As designers, we have a tendency to express ourselves through design, in the same way when designing with other people for their

purposes, their stories have to be expressed in the final design outcome (Lawson, 1980; Despres, 2016). When designing for social innovation to produce new social engagements within a cross-cultural context, it is imperative that we consider the complexities of the lives of the people in the community while understanding and acknowledging the historical context that has brought their culture to its current state (Kolvach, 2009). Therefore, design for social innovation happens effectively through participatory design and co-design (Despres, 2016). In the context of adapting traditional craftsmanship and industry to fit the modern lifestyles of traditional communities, co-designing and collective dialogue are ways to bring ownership of production to the people of the community (Despres, 2016). Designers have the ability to contribute their design knowledge when working with people to supplement their craft and use it to iterate old ways of doing things, and to find new opportunities where traditional knowledge can provide great value (Yang, 2015).

### Design Experience in a Taiwanese village

The design experience discussed by Yang (2015) in “Industrial Design Students Design for Social Innovation: Case Study in a Taiwanese Village”, shows the amount of positive change that designers can bring to a community. In the case of the Foothills village, rush weaving had been a traditional craft passed down over generations, but the modern production of industrialized products has seen a decline in rush-weaving practice and teaching. By co-designing new activities, processes, interactions, and products with the community in the foothills, the Taiwanese students helped to educate the people of the Foothills to think outside of traditional rush-weaving

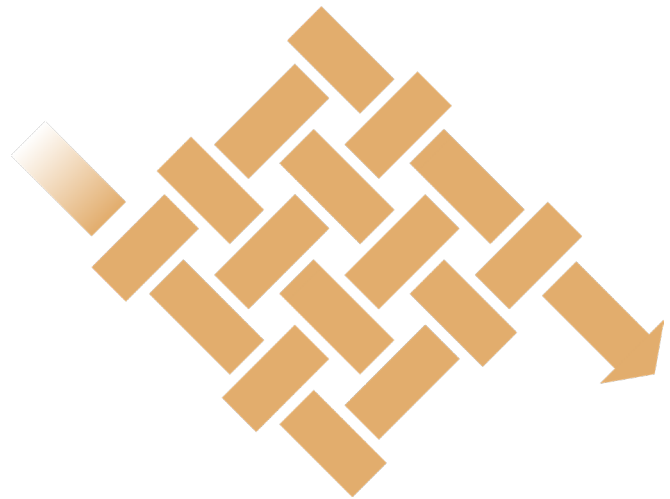
activities. Unconventional rush-woven products were created with the weavers. These new ideas pushed the craftspeople to think outside of woven hats and rugs. Additional creative work, such as branding and packaging, was devised with the community to distinguish their quality of craft from lower-quality wholesale alternatives. These new initiatives promoted a fresh rush-weaving culture in the community, which turned their traditional industry into a new enterprise. Furthermore, one of the designs created with an elderly rush-weaving woman won a *Muji International Design* award in 2014. The involvement of design students with the community led to greater social interaction between community members, new ways about thinking of their traditional craft, community, place in the economy, and even reuse and recyclability of waste objects (Yang, 2015).

### Discussion

As trained designers, we often make the assumption that we are able to tackle almost any problem and devise a solution. Therefore, it is easy to internalize the decision-making process to inform the design of “perfect” products or systems. The issue is that we, as designers, have to design things that work with and for others. Everyone who interacts with a design will contribute different values, experiences, and points of view. To truly design for people, we must work with them to identify what is important and make something that is relevant for their way of life. In the case of traditional communities, this is even more important as these people live their lives with different experiences than someone from a contrasting culture, region, or any city. By involving people in the design process, they are given a greater voice and become more invested in the process and final product. This can be seen in the case of the traditional rush weavers who became more involved in the creative process and enjoyed exploring the depth of their craft.

Products, services, or activities that are designed through co-design become culturally relevant for any community, and with a sense of ownership they are easily adopted and maintained. Traditional knowledge and design knowledge can be used in tandem to discover and approach innovative ways of dealing with traditional industries and ways of living through co-design.

The implications of the case described above show that with the help of design, specifically co-design, positive social, cultural, and economic change can be adopted. Working with a community to develop new design ideas is important for these designs to have any cultural relevance and for community members to adopt these new practices as stakeholders. Traditional knowledge is an important aspect of many cultures as it guides the way communities think and approach problems. This knowledge can be used to inform design decisions and provide deep insights into human interactions and the value that these products, systems or interactions provide.



“To truly design for people, we must work with them to identify what is important and make something that is relevant for their way of life.”

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