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INSIGHTS

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

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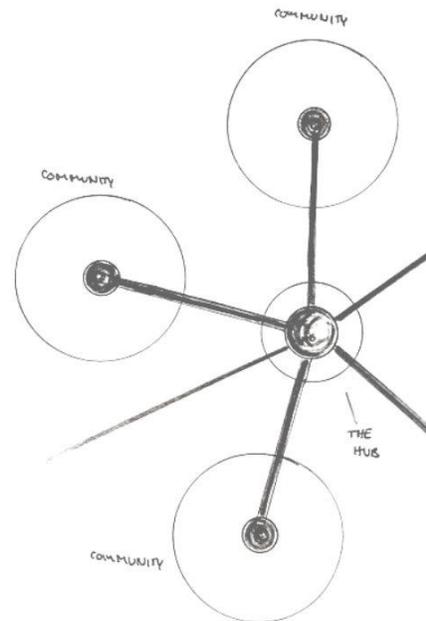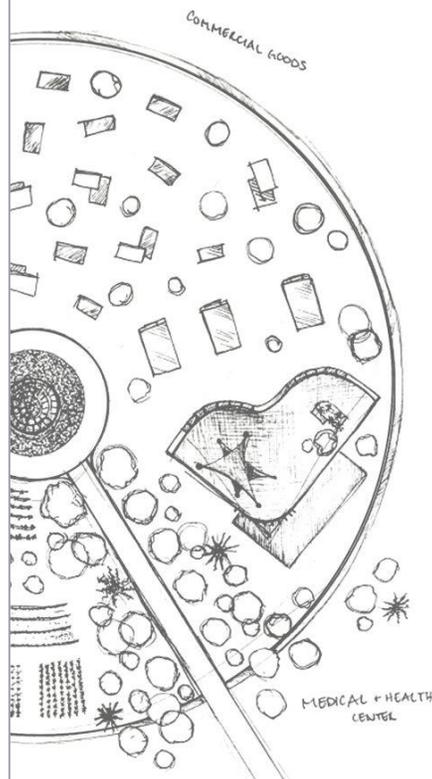
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Achieving Culturally Inclusive Design for Social Innovation in Indigenous Communities

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION - INCLUSIVE DESIGN - CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE - INDIGENOUS CULTURE

This paper discusses how design for social innovation employs culture to solve social issues and can create more culturally-inclusive solutions for indigenous communities. Many current design processes, such as Human-Centred Design, are driven by Western values. This prevalence of Western culture in the design approach often leads to exclusion of minority cultures that hold differing values, such as Indigenous culture (Akama et al., 2019). By acknowledging the importance of culture throughout the design process, the role of design shifts from prescriptive and imposed, to a means of empowerment. By reflecting on an example of social innovation involving the Whanganui River Settlement Claim, the role of culture in design for social innovation will be highlighted.

Human-Centered Design vs. Co-Design
In many parts of the world Indigenous communities suffer from the aftermath of colonialism, often facing alienation within post-colonial society (Akama et al., 2019). The very dominant Western perspectives inform the design and development of modern societies and perpetuate the exclusion of minority cultures such as Indigenous cultures. This is evident in the Human-Centred Design (HCD) process (Akama et al., 2019). Akama et al. (2019) argues that HCD is based in "industrialized, Eurocentric origins" (p. 1). In HCD, the concepts of universal design as well as empathy are key elements of the design process. Universal design, according to Kasulis (as cited in Akama et al., 2019), deconstructs design to create universally relatable and understandable solutions, regardless of the user's background. The result, however, is a design outcome that is "culturally neutral, objective, interchangeable, and a-geographical" (Akama et al, 2019,

p. 5). As Akama et al. (2019) argue, "Designers are not culturally or politically neutral… our sociocultural values inevitably manifest through our designing" (p.9). As individuals, we have our own knowledge, cultures, and other experiences that guide our perceptions of the world, as well as our approach to design. Despite any attempts to achieve universal design, the views of the designer will always influence the solution. Similarly, empathizing with the user, a common practice in HCD, fails to account for the background of designers and how their own experiences may filter their understanding of the user's perspective (Akama et al., 2019). In regard to designing with Indigenous communities, once designers realize their lack of expertise in the problem space, this experience humbles designers and creates more space for ideas and action by the Indigenous community. As a result, designers are led to adopt co-design processes, encouraging the user to play a key role as a contributor to the solution. Cultural awareness helps designers remain cognizant of their own culture and influences. It also elevates the importance of the indigenous community and their cultural knowledge as vital contributors to the design process (de Bruin & Read, 2018). Therefore, co-designing in design for social innovation acknowledges culture as a core design consideration and can empower indigenous communities (Akama, et al., 2019). This is demonstrated in the Whanganui River Claims Settlement case.

The Whanganui River Claims Settlement
The *Whanganui River Claims Settlement* addressed the exploitation of the Whanganui River, a river in New Zealand that held spiritual significance for the hapu and iwi peoples, the local Maori (de Bruin & Read, 2018). De

Bruin and Read (2018) outline how both the Maori and the government worked together, across their contrasting cultural frameworks, to understand the significance of the Whanganui River. Through discussion and negotiation, the Whanganui River was granted personhood, and gained the associated rights. Even if the Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ) government values are based in Western ideologies, the government recognized the exploitation of the river, and the accompanying severe environmental impacts. Thus, they finally considered the values of the Maori people and how this could be applied to the problem. The Maori share a close relationship with the land, the natural world being a key aspect of their culture. The Hapu and Iwi people see this river as part of themselves. Through this settlement, the A/NZ Government gained insight into its own value system and its shortcomings, and the Maori were given the opportunity to share their values and perceptions of the environment. Through this process, the two parties were able to integrate their cultures and value systems to create a socially innovative solution that was sustainable for the Whanganui River, culturally inclusive for the Maori, and integrated into existing societal infrastructure.

A Means of Empowerment
It is through design that social innovation has the potential to create more inclusive futures for Indigenous communities. By embracing local culture as a natural and inevitable aspect in every design problem, process, and solution, design for social innovation can open up discussions on the chasms between cultures and create awareness of how design can be used to bridge these gaps. This approach also gives the community the opportunity to contribute to a design problem, and ultimately, give the Indigenous people agency over their own affairs (Henry et al., 2017). In Canada, design for social innovation with Indigenous communities can also play a role in Reconciliation (Barberstock, 2017). Design for social innovation through co-design processes can provide the Indigenous community with the opportunity to give their input on community issues and embed their values into the solutions. As a result, design for social innovation can become a platform for Indigenous communities to educate others on their culture and values, and to advocate for their own rights.

Culture plays a leading role in social issues, and it is necessary to embrace this when designing for social innovation. When culture is a major component of design considerations, the user becomes a key contributor, encouraging a co-design process. Design for social innovation can be used in Indigenous communities to create culturally-inclusive solutions. By giving Indigenous communities agency over social issues that affect them, they are empowered to create their own change. As different cultures are invited to participate in the design process, this may lead to popularization of non-western forms of design thinking. This diversification of the field of design is crucial in matching the reality of the diversity of users and will play an important role in advancing cultural inclusivity in design for social innovation.
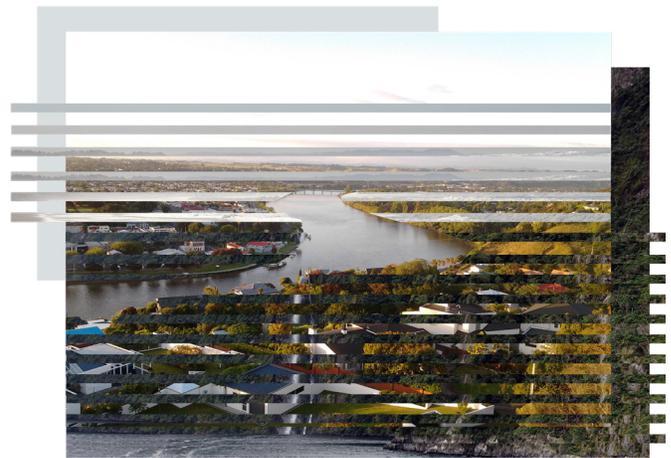
"Cultural awareness helps designers remain cognizant of their own culture and influences."

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