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INTERVIEW

DESIGN FOR WELL-BEING

Text by Peter Wong Translation by Sunni Zhang

“Design for Well-Being” is HKDI’s major education and collaboration direction in the coming few years. In this issue, we speak with Michael Chan, Deputy Academic Director (Design) of HKDI, to find out how the institute conceptualises and practises design thinking, educates and cultivates new generations of designers, and continues to design for human beings’ welfare.



The concept of designing for wellbeing, admittedly, has been around for quite a while, but few gave much thought to it until recent years when the focus on sustainability heightened on a global scale. This universal obsession with sustainability brought designing for wellbeing to everybody’s attention, and eventually became an indispensable design direction. In regard to this, Michael shares his insight: “In the past, some students chose to study design because they found it fashionable. They thought being a designer meant having a cool career, and many designs were often created on the basis of aesthetics. However, we see significant changes in recent years. Last October, we hosted our annual HKDI inspire* conference, inviting many experts from fields such as international healthcare and social design to come and offer their input, and received positive feedback from our students. This is a sign of our transforming social context, where there has been increased awareness and recognition of society as a whole and of the importance of culture. It is also a global design trend, where design starts with being ‘human-centred’, to look out for the wellbeing of people.”

So how exactly does HKDI respond to this global trend? “Actually, designing for wellbeing has always been a critical direction of our institute. In recent years, we have been promoting ‘design



thinking’ as a problem-solving method. We started with encouraging students to address problems from a human-centred approach, starting from being empathetic. Then, we tried expanding outward through various projects and collaborations with social welfare organisations. Through ‘design thinking’, we invite both teachers and students to participate, to solve problems relating to society, healthcare and service improvement. All of these fall within the category of designing for wellbeing. Seeing how well-received these projects have been, the institute decided to focus on ‘Design for Well-Being’ as our future direction.”

The combination of academic knowledge and real-life projects, fusing together textbook theories and hands-on practice, is often considered an ideal

teaching method. Michael shares some of the institute’s ongoing projects: “We are collaborating with the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers (SARDA) in Hong Kong, to improve the overall experience within their rehabilitation centre for young females. SARDA is one of the oldest rehabilitation centres in Hong Kong, so inevitably encounters some issues that come with age, which led to the decline in the number of people using the centre’s services. This was where we came in, to revamp SARDA’s brand image. We then positioned them positively as a rehabilitation centre, redesigned their visual identity system, and utilised games as a means to improve relationships among patients, eventually elevating the overall user experience at the centre.

Another project is a collaboration with St. James' Settlement. We work to improve how students with autism communicate with others. Our teachers and students began by listening to them to understand their needs, and realised that many autistic students' language impairment is one of the issues to be tackled. We then used visual elements as a means of communication, by designing different pieces of cloth to help autistic students express themselves and tell their stories. Now, we have collected quite a lot of these cloths containing students' heartfelt messages, which may culminate in the publishing of a book that records these stories."

Both of these projects are in progress, while more are under research and discussion. For example, the awareness about osteoporosis among local people

is still relatively low now, and there are limited organisations available for the actual check-up procedures. Therefore, HKDI joins forces with social welfare organisations and healthcare groups to design a holistic experience for diagnosing osteoporosis. The project adds the role of design into the conventional method consisting only of medical professionals and organisations. The project stakeholders were thrilled to find out that design could help perfect the entire experience. At the moment, the plan is to create a mobile station in a vehicle, sending doctors and nurses to different communities to offer check-ups for citizens.

"The future direction of design must return to human being's basic needs, instead of looking at aesthetics and profit-making only. It will focus more



on the sustainability of living and life in general. Some Nordic cities promote thirty-minute bike ride living circles, which effectively bring nature back into urban living.

If I were to define 'Design for Well-Being', happiness would be its ultimate goal. For instance, can we use 'Happy City' as a city development goal instead of the often talked-about 'Smart City'? Cities are always built by people, but other than the economy and technology, should there exist an indicator such as a happiness index to measure human development? I strongly believe that a city's development can only be truly balanced and holistic when we can honestly take happiness as an indicator. Designing for wellbeing, after all, is aiming towards an ideal balance." Michael remarks firmly, with genuine empathy.

To promote the new "Design for Well-Being" scheme, HKDI produced short films to tell stories of how design brings about happiness and wellbeing. The institute will also present relevant exhibitions to introduce the concept and its benefit to the public, including Design Does – for Better and for Worse from Spain, an interactive exhibition featuring designer proposals addressing a list of social issues. In a way, the method of collecting big data is also a crucial element of "Design for Well-Being." Michael acknowledges that the key to success for all of these projects lies within the possibilities enabled by big data and the internet.

