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## Interview - Design by People, for People

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INTERVIEW - YANKI LEE

# DESIGN BY PEOPLE, FOR PEOPLE

Written by: Peter Wong Translation: Sunni Zhang

Yanki Lee, founding director of HKDI DESIS Lab for Social Design Research, returned on campus to speak at the Design Thinking lecture series. Titled *Design by People, for People*, the lecture zooms in on the relationship between design and human beings. With over 20 years of experience in design research and education, this is both a topic Dr. Lee has deeply explored, as well as what she believes to be the future direction for the field of design.

Lee began her training as a designer with the Interior Design program at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, followed by an MA in Architecture from the Royal College of Art. After her postgraduate degree, however, Lee did not further her studies in spatial design, nor did she begin working as a designer. Instead, she turned to design education and research at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, which she

pursued for over a decade. During this time, Lee also earned a PhD in Design Participation from Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Throughout her career, Lee has focused on exploring the true meanings of design as a co-creative practice, and getting citizens involved in designing for their own living environment. For Lee: "My interest in how people interact with architecture is significantly higher than in architecture

itself. Ultimately, what I want to explore is the relationship between design and those that interact with it.

Conventionally, design practice leaves no room for human engagement. Even though the idea of designing for people was brought up with the emergence of 20th century Modernism, the conversation grew into few designer-led discussions lacking diversity. I

have always wanted to define clearly the relationship between design and people, and with years of research and practice, I propose *Design by People, for People*. It is a statement and a topic pointing straight to the future."

For those who know a thing or two about Lee's career, they will know that a big portion of her work addresses issues concerning the "elderly", and it started as early as when she began her research in design education in 2000. "At the time, I selected ageing as my research topic and older people as my main project partners, and went through a development process that can be summarised as 'design for them', 'with them' and 'by them'. For example, when I set a brief for my students to design a healthcare product for better walking, we invited some senior citizens as the future users during ideation and let my students practice 'designing with them'. We soon realised that these senior citizens were not designers after all, and we unavoidably were met with difficulties during communication. At the end of the day, we should not single-mindedly design with them just to advocate for an action that we consider as being politically right, but it is necessary to provide them with adequate background knowledge on design, introduce them to the basics of design, or even design tools for them to use during the process. It is all about making things easier for them to participate.

I did my doctoral design study at Lower Ngau Tau Kok Estate during SARS outbreak, where I spent 18 months working on site for research and communicating with local residents. From there I learned that *design by people* is the way to go. The most effective and efficient way to solve issues faced by local community is to let themselves lead in the design process."

Professor Roger Coleman, the founding director at the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, played a major role in Lee's avid research in ageing and design. Professor Coleman's theory "*Design for Our Future Selves*" greatly influenced Yanki and even transformed her views on design, she says, "We will all grow old and become part of the ageing population of the future. Design should not only focus on changing the now, but also what's yet to come."

As Lee goes on about the older people

of the future, it is obvious that her focus extends beyond senior citizens and is essentially every single person in the society including "the others" outside of the design communities. With population ageing, there will be increase in the proportion of senior members. However, we should no longer think and act from the perspectives of designing for them or with them, but giving them the authority to lead and make decisions, and that is design by people.

In 2017, Lee co-founded social design collective and education charity, Enable Foundation with Ire Tsui, an expert in the media industry. The collective aims to inspire community creativity and promote "social design - design - future". It offers a platform for people of all age groups, industries and cultures, to come together and collaboratively brainstorm on possibilities of social innovation, letting citizens design for their own and future.

With this belief in mind, Enable Foundation created Social Innovation Design Labs (SI.DLab), a cross-generational and interdisciplinary programme facilitating co-creations between different individuals sharing similar value. Its first attempt is to address Hong Kong's population ageing issues in three innovative scopes, including *Fine Dying*, which invites the public to collaboratively design for faded matters in the urban culture; *Dementia Going*, which aims to bridge the gap between dementia patients and community living; and last but not least, *Productive Ageing*, an effective discussion on ageing creatively and with dignity in Hong Kong.

In the three years following Enable Foundation's establishment, Lee found it to be a great opportunity for her to continue to explore different possibilities of social innovation through engaging those outside of design communities. Through working and communicating with social work NGOs, Lee realised that staff within these organisations already possess a considerable amount of creative ideas, which she calls service innovation. Lee believes these services could be more holistically executed and even with their potentials maximised if design is incorporated in the process. In a way, the combination of service innovation and design produces social innovation.

With so much expertise in social design and design education, as well as being the founder of the HKDI DESIS Lab, Lee shares her insights on Design for Well Being, the research and education direction that HKDI has been actively promoting. "In my opinion, we first need to come to consensus on whose wellbeing we are addressing. From there, we can define our topic and operation methods. For an institution, it is possible to be more macroscopic with such a vague direction. For little and independent organisations like Enable Foundation, we need to accurately define and position ourselves before we begin any projects, so naturally we start with design research. We try to understand all factors relating to our topic, both internally and externally, and then we decide on how to begin with design to form the process and bring "the others" to co-create solution methodologies solutions for our future selves."



From left : Sunny Chow (COO of Enable Foundation), Ire Tsui and Yanki Lee (Co-Founders of Enable Foundation).