Participatory Design among College Youths and Rural Areas

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Abstract Following the tendency of urbanization and commercial development, people migrate to urban areas to seek for better opportunities that rural areas lose the vast majority of young population and only elders remain. These villages suffer serious recessions continually and lack of inputs from public resources. Therefore the authorities devote new programs to improving rural regenerations. Apart from the rural regeneration plan 2011, a rural migratory plan of college youths “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” has been activated at the same time. Five sophomores from Department of Cultural and Creative Industries, HungKuang University enrolled the contest of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” held by Soil and Water Conservation Bureau in 2014. The classic community development procedure was not applied by these students, but a new vision from non-spatial training background was adopted to determine a new development axis and target thus to propel people and surrounding within the village. This report illustrates the targets, process and results of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching”. Hopefully the observations and conversations from this differential procedure provide innovative concepts that a future integrative application would contribute to a premised conversation in terms of creative design, solutions and action strategies.

Keywords Rural Regeneration, “Touch Rural Village – How Touching”, Community Participation, Creative Action

Half-Farming/Half-X are gradually sowed among younger generations. To stimulate the aged rural areas, Soil and Water Conservation Bureau launched the program of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” since 2011 in order to encourage young generations involving in rural community affairs based on their creativity and academic backgrounds. Hopefully the process of discussion and interactions between college students and rural communities would contribute to further developments of rural areas and better understandings in terms of rural areas, agriculturist and agriculture.

The contest of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” considers college instructors / students to be the execution bodies, rural communities to be the development space and rural regeneration policies to be the main axis. College teams present their stationed-in plans respectively to win over official approvals and one hundred thousand NT dollars of stationed-in fund. The college teams carry out their plans during summer vocation in a timely manner. Soil and Water Conservation Bureau suggests that this contest aims at leading students to experience rural communities, raising their attention to rural development, enlarging the service range of academic resources thus rural communities may benefit from professional research and techniques. During the last five years, professional teams of various disciplines provided different services to rural communities that both rural culture and industry benefit from the process. [2] College students involved also gather both knowledge and experience outside of school texts, which enrich their academic life at the same time.

During the stationed-in period, the teams may proceed activities involving in field study, industry value-added service, ecological conservation, environment protection, historic monuments preservation, artistic creation, rural landscape refinement, cultural-creative merchandise design, creative marketing, reuse of deserted space...etc. based upon communities’ subjective demands, discussions and approvals, thus the teams become the actual executive units. The teams are encouraged to experiment, create and collaborate to work out solutions for rural communities. Hopefully the members involved would continue to make

1. Foreword

Since early 1990’s, the migration of rural youth population to urban areas in Taiwan changes the population structure that elders become the major remaining rural residents. This situation leads to lacking of working force supply and public resource input therefore aged, declined, or stagnant become the synonyms of rural areas [1]. Following the gradual awakening of environmental awareness, the concepts of Satoyama Initiative and

their efforts to the communities after the stationed-in period.

2. Methodology

The team discussed in this report was composed of one instructor, five students from HungKuang University and one student from Ling Tung University. Team members come from Department of Cultural & Creative Industries and Department of Visual Communication Design respectively. The team works were organized into photographing (for the program record), painting & design, text records, activity planning, accounting & miscellaneous, and co-ordination. Team members are in charge of individual assigned works and then support each other. The instructor, whose professions are in community development & participatory design, decided to assist the members and being a bystander at the same time. The classic community development procedure was not applied by these students, but a new vision from non-spatial training background was adopted to determine a new development axis and target thus to propel people and surrounding within the community. Various prior discussions were held between residents and the students to bring in residents' ideas at the early stage. As the remaining residents are mainly elders, this step may avoid the weakness of traditional top-down method and decrease the hindrance from residents since the residents may accept these students as friends or a part of the community gradually. A smooth bottom-up participation mechanism was built up as the conversations were made within the community instead of community and authorities. The students then observed from farming procedure, agricultural product manufacturing, and community organization to individual family. These twenty-year-old students read the community by their hearts, sensed the surrounding by their bodies, helped the community by their hands, and improved the difficult position by their creativity. As the residents are comparatively weak in terms of economical position and professional skills & resources [1], the traditional top-down method serves as an efficient way to generate action schemes and funding sources. The prior discussion records suggest residents are not willing to invest in community affairs due to income limitation and non-statutory obligation. Residents are willing to donate their labor hours instead, but require a neutral leading organization to cope with common expectation in terms of action plans and public funding. These students took part as the best medium for rural regeneration programs that the strength and weakness of bottom-up and top-down methods are properly complemented.

In the past, the teams involved in the program of "Touch Rural Village – How Touching" mainly chose their hometowns or nearby communities as the stationed-in locations. This team applied a different strategy comparing

to other competitors that they reviewed the rural communities where regeneration plans had been done but remained in need of further supports from the database of Soil and Water Conservation Bureau. Finally Liziyuan community was chosen due to its development potential. Liziyuan is located on No. 175 county highway (at 10.5K, total length of 20K) where coffee trees are planted along the road. Many café restaurants gather along the road for its stunning scenery thus this coffee highway made its debut. Zengwen Reservoir, Wusanto Reservoir and Baihe Reservoir are also nearby recreation sites. The tropical climate provides good growing seasons that Liziyuan produces plenty of agricultural products, e.g. Longan in July & August, Ponkan (Chinese Honey Orange) in October & November, and Coffee beans in December, January & February.

Although Liziyuan is a newly developed community, a lack of invisible resources delays local development that younger generation migrate to cities and the remaining population age over time. The community area is measured at 496.21 hectare, and only 149 families (417 residents) are settled within it that community population still declines year by year. Due to its remote location, there is still plenty of space stays unplanned. On the other hand, local agricultural products show weakness in terms of packaging, marketing and distribution due to lacking of sufficient funding. Apart from traditional agriculture business, the development of secondary & tertiary industrial sectors or tourism business is wholly void of actions, which leads to the situation of population loss. Various seminars were conducted among the team, the community development association and resident representatives during the primary visit in order to realize their expectations and vision. Most of the local farming populations are elders. Their opinions of building the balance between economic development and environmental protection were regarded as the priority. The principles of non-chemical, non-industrial production and non-engineering approaches were commonly agreed as the basis among all participants. To establish the foundation of sustainable development for the community, the team would like to strengthen the linkage between Liziyuan residents and the land, organize localized activities in community development, lead the residents away from home to return, and build up their understanding and sense of hometown. A series of participating activities were conducted, such as various interactions between design/construction teams and the residents, cross-fields professional learning, accompanying relationships and dialogues between the residents and natural surroundings. [3-6] The team did not pre-determine a possible activity result. However, they expected to organize a long-term planning in terms of community development through their good intension in dialogue and action that community residents may gather together closely.

3. Target & Process

Liziyuan team of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” 2014 combines cross-fields of design disciplines to investigate how to express and present what they have observed and obtained from the communication process. The core of this stationed-in plan is to conduct participatory design mechanism, and then put the discussions into actual design practices. The main design concept focused on local cultural landscape, living meaning and environmental analysis & assessment as a whole while local physical and ecological environment was respected. Firstly, the team carried out environment investigations and idea assessments, and presents their concepts of planning/design and relative issues to the community that all participants interact with each other continually for concept verification. Young

college students from urban areas and aged local residents gathered at the same space for the first time to discuss and realize the differences between the two parties regarding living experiences and concepts. A large community model was prepared by the team to serve as a platform to allow participants discussing individual spatial circumstances and working out potential development possibilities. The method of participatory design gathers community awareness and also shortens the distance between the team and the community; meanwhile, brainstorming and dialoguing during the process also gather more creativity thus to generate solutions based on demand orientation.

Initially the team found that Liziyuan community, being a significant node on the coffee highway, is less famous than other communities on the same coffee highway and also benefits less from tourism business. Therefore the team

would like to improve economic activities and agriculture production of the community via spatial refinement, agricultural product marketing etc. thus to determine its unique characteristics and self-explaining nature. Hopefully the foundation of sustainable development would be constructed via participatory design approach. After a series of participating discussions and analysis, the team determined and gave priority to the following targets which were in need of specific design works:

1. Visual improvement of the retaining wall.
2. Community Development Association identity system design.
3. Travel guide / Map.
4. Agricultural product packaging design.
5. Seasonal experiential tour.

The team proceeded to manage their works respectively according to the five targets listed above. Regarding target 1, a site study was conducted initially. Relative design concepts were organized according to the observations from walking or driving that sketching and talking were major approaches to work closely with the residents. Targets 2, 3, 4 belong to visual design scope, therefore the team held a seminar to work with Community Development Association members directly in order to cope with local features and community spirit. Three types of design were delivered after numerous discussions, and a public presentation / voting was held to choose the community preferred identify system. For Liziyuan Travel Guide / Map, the team managed a resource study of the whole community that the first hand data was collected and filtered according to resident opinions and dialogues. The selected locations were then further investigated and described in text that Liziyuan specific travel guide / map was completed accordingly. Furthermore, apart from the general packaging design of agricultural products, the team also managed to change the traditional marketing approach in order to increase residents' income from farming. The most suitable way to realize agricultural products would be to take part in harvesting and farming works. Team members joined the actual daily works to obtain better understanding in local business activity. The newly gained experiences and various dialogues urged the delivery of whole new packaging designs solely for the community. Seasonal experiential tour aims at allowing tourists to experience the beauty of Liziyuan in four seasons. This sort of tour shall combine with travel guide / map and determine the correlations between agricultural products and seasons, which makes it a multi-dimensional proposition. Although individual target is different in nature, the same procedure involving investigation, interview, proposition, discussion and revision is always required to reach the best result. Most of the community residents provided positive suggestions and comments, which contribute to the appearance of miraculous ideas and execution solutions.

With the participation of the community, the team understood further in terms of farming experience and local

characteristics. These new knowledge and finding help the team to propose solutions with better integrity and consistency. The difference between this team and normal design company can be easily identified since the team built up common experiences and shared concepts with the residents. No doubt the output of the participatory design would cope with local demands closely and effectively.

4. Discussion

Traditional design proposition is usually made based on designers' subjective observations and ideas, e.g. abstract thinking or non-user orientation, that users' demands are not proper met efficiently. The team discussed in this report spent over one month to execute full-time resident observation, community participation and continuing communication, which allows them to meet users' targets efficiently and remains at their professional level. During surveying and painting procedure of community tour guide / map, the team and community residents applied a different angle to observe the places where daily life and works taking place, which speeded up the linkage between life experience and emotion. Interviews with the residents were held to gather first-hand opinions that user's ideas may be proper classified and considered while developing design sketches, thus to deliver a community-specific tour guide / map.

The idea of stationed-in plan by college students is considered an experimental plan that teams from various academic disciplines make propositions and execute solutions for individual communities respectively. For current college students, the lessons of environment experiencing, communication and negotiation are not available from school. What they propose to the communities is entirely different in nature comparing to those coming from computer workshops, not to mention the acceptance by the residents. The team let the design find the way itself via space experiencing, interviews and routine dialogues. The problems suffered in terms of conceptual difference would always be resolved after applying common consensuses that the process actually produces the design accordingly.

After Liziyuan stationed-in plan in 2014, the subsequent influence continues that the passion and thought of six Liziyuan team members are raised to care further in community and cultural issues. Community residents are also touched due to the students' passion, therefore the community residents work with each other more closely and act aggressively to apply more propositions from the authority for a better resource input due to their economical constraints.

The efforts for the five proposing targets were finally delivered after two-month activities during summer in 2014. The subsequent design and planning works were done according to individual target requirements, which to present residents' expectation in fulfilling the purpose of

community refinement. The team produced a massive billboard and a model at the final presentation to illustrate their efforts:

1. Visual Improvement of the Retaining Wall

There is a sixty-eight meter retaining wall along Coffee Highway. The community residents would like it to become a story-telling wall that all passengers would realize the distinguishing features of Liziyuan. The three major agricultural products were selected to be the main roles of the wall story, which were Coffee, Ponkan (Chinese Honey Orange) and Longan. The team designers transformed the three products into cute totems which were made by mosaic. The growing stages of the three products were shown at the same time. This approach does not alter the structure & area of the retaining wall based on non-engineering principle, but applies a new decoration layer only. The physical surrounding suffered no pressure as usual.

Under the sunshine of August, team members and community residents commenced the improving works. As the surrounding environment was humid, the first step was surface preparation by wiping out the thick moss. Cement work was then applied to create a smooth surface. The team

sketched the whole retaining wall and left the mosaicking jobs to every participants to be carried out during holidays or non-working hours. During 2014 summer, the whole community mobilized and every participant contributed to the plan in different ways. There was a group focusing on wiping the retaining wall and crashed tiles. Grannies continued to supply cold drinks for everyone. Grandpas told old-time stories while working and the younger accompanists sang their beloved 70's folk songs. Every participant worked toward the same target and finally created a massive sixty-eight meter painting wall.

The team also found there was no fund source for mosaicking. Therefore, apart from the stationed-in plan, the team assisted the community to apply to Soil and Water Conservation Bureau, Tainan Branch for a fund of NT dollar 140,000. This application also received a distinction mark among all application assessments in Tainan area. This co-working model allowed the team to help not only the stationed-in plan, but also educate the community how to look for resource and support from the authority. We are convinced that both the team and the community shall benefit from this new model enormously.

Figure 1. Mosaicking works done by the team and residents.

Figure 2. Retaining wall decorated with mosaic.

Figure 3. The sixty-eight meter retaining wall completion.

2. Community Development Association Identity System Design

Community Development Association of Liziyuan is a newly established organization that a highly recognizable identifying system is required either in communication or activities. During participatory discussions, the residents would like the identifying system to present Liziyuan distinguishing features that three major agricultural products were selected as the main roles. The team pondered deeply the best way to show self-explanatory characteristic. Three identifying systems in different colors were presented for voting in the final presentation. After the preferred option was chosen, the team refined this design after numerous discussions and revisions that the final work shows Liziyuan's unique characteristics thoroughly.

Figure 4. The three identifying systems presented to Liziyuan community.

3. Travel Guide / Map

The team conducted a resource study during the stationed-in period and found many characteristic shops and farmers who operate as personal business. They are all unique in different aspects that these great tastes await visits from the tourists. After a primary common survey, the team interviewed every shops and farmers to obtain location information first. A filtering & sorting operation was done, followed by commercial photographing of every shop. The team organized and painted the community tour map according to the interview data. All sorts of useful information were clearly marked on the map that tourists may find their preferred shops easily, sense the elite quality and experience a whole new Liziyuan community. As there would be no new roadway constructed, this approach imposes no physical works on the surrounding thus intrudes local residents and original ecological environment at a minimal level.

Figure 5. The tourist map & guide.

Figure 6. 175 & Good Fortune Longan Gift boxes

4. Agricultural Product Packaging Design

The major business activities in Liziyuan community belong to primary industry that farmers obtain limited income only. Therefore the team would like to help in upgrading local business. Based on the principles of non-chemical and non-industrial production in the community, the team considered to develop new packaging designs and out-source packaging production. In the beginning local farmers packed their products in ready-made packaging material plus their name stickers only. Apparently this strategy neither contributed to community branding nor promoted community reputation. Team members took part in farming works in order to realize the business further, thus to create suitable packaging design and marketing strategies. There were several joint projects presented in the final presentation in respect to tailor-made concepts combining the story wall and the tour guide as a whole. Regarding the sales strategy, Liziyuan's summer Longan harvest was always sold immediately in basket pack, because fresh Longan fades shortly during transportation that product distribution is very limited. On the other hand, fresh Longan could only be sold at an economy price, which is less profited comparing to other fruits. Therefore, in order to overcome this difficult position, the team suggested making fresh Longan into seedless dried or preserved fruit that it can be consumed directly or paired with other dishes easily. Furthermore, the dried Longan was combined with other local products and became a part of gift box pack, which increases the

economic value efficiently. The team delivered the following two gift box designs:

(1) 175 Gift Box (Means to Accompany Each Other, Homonymic in Taiwanese Mother Tongue)

Liziyuan is a significant node on 175 coffee highways, therefore the team named it according to homonymic meaning of accompanying each other in Taiwanese mother tongue. This idea connects not only the sender and taker of the gift box, but also Liziyuan and you. The gift box is composed of coffee drip packs, Longan tea and Ponkan jam, which to present Liziyuan three major agricultural products at once to potential customers. The story of retaining wall is also connected to the gift box design in order to strengthen the image of Liziyuan.

(2) Good Fortune Longan Gift Box

Longan is also used as the main role in Good Fortune Longan Gift Box. Fresh Longan are husked, seeded, sun-dried, and then packed in big sealed cans or small packs to compose this gift box. Taiwanese tourists prefer auspicious sense in consumption so the team transformed the homonymic of Longan into Good Fortune in traditional Chinese, which to demonstrate the precious relationship between the sender and the taker. The Longan figurine is shown as a tumbler which carries two meanings; tumbler spirit means lucky in Taiwan, and it also means farmers would never be knocked down no matter what difficulty is suffered.

Figure 7. The cover designs of seasonal tours.

5. Seasonal Experiential Tour

People value weekend holidays and enjoy short travel. Liziyuan is located at Dong Shan district in Tainan City, and it has been one of tourists' favorite areas along 175 coffee highways. Due to its excellent geographic location, the team and residents would like to figure out a specific tourism subject in a practical way. In order to satisfy potential tourists regarding sense of freshness and intellectual hunger, the team organized seasonal experiential tours according to community's seasonal characteristics and resources. The individual tour combines the changes in season, agriculture, and landscapes to become spring, summer, autumn and winter programs. The advertisement of tours would like to persuade tourists coming to experience Liziyuan in different seasons that they may realize the uniqueness of Liziyuan comparing to other communities. The above tour information and advertisement designs were also demonstrated to the residents in the final presentation. Residents realized that these new tours may increase economical income but tourists may also intrude their daily life. Their understandings approved this possible change and allowed the following seasonal tours:

1. Spring: Ponkan is sprouting, Longan is blooming, and Coffee is fruiting. Birds turn out in full force by the first spring thunder. Spring Show debuts and let's follow its footsteps for a journey.
2. Summer: Passionate sunshine illuminates Liziyuan valley and lusters the Longan trees. It's the tasting season as Longan is full and juicy. We look forward to your visit.
3. Autumn: Here comes the harvesting season. A year of effort awaits the harvest on Ponkan trees. The sweet and sour Ponkan matches the cool season properly. We expect you to experience the harvest.
4. Winter: Everything hibernates but Coffee. Coffee is red, kitchen oven is burned red and New Year couplets are painted in red. Let's have a cup of coffee in Liziyuan and let the aroma accompany you for the coming year.

After times of community participations in various ways,

the team found there was always a group of cute children surrounded. They kept talking all the time and the team would like to know their views of hometown. Therefore an activity was held specifically for children: there was no gap minute for the hand holding painting brush. The works were full of boldness and aesthetics that a tree, a beetle and the rainbow accompany children's hands to deliver their purest fantasies. Papers were crayoned in thick black and then painted with their ideal patterns that Liziyuan is shown via children's vision. The apple trees next to Fu Sheng Temple, the big calabash behind Celestials Shrine, and the airborne beetle plus children's tour guiding that we realize Fu Sheng Temple just locates next to the community where stunning scenery is available. Celestials Shrine is also called Fu You Temple, and there is a legend of toad fairies being on everybody's lips. The mysterious Liziyuan treasures are waiting to be discovered. From the participation of children, the team discovered more secret scenic attractions, and these locations were integrated into seasonal tours.

During nighttime of the working days or afternoon of the weekend, the platform of participatory design allowed the team and community residents to determine specific user expectations regarding community regeneration, and then summarized a common dream for Liziyuan. This mechanism gathered the most demands and opinions from the community, which also generated the most common-agreed solutions that more and more residents would be inspired thereafter. To summarize the result of this stationed-in plan, we determined the future community developing targets and approved by the residents as follows:

1. Build up a nature, harmonic community where residents live happily and care about public affairs.
2. Strengthen community relationship; Increase agriculture produce exposure; Employ group marketing strategy to replace personal business models.
3. Impress visitors by refining the current deserted space in the community.
4. Advertise local characteristics, particularly the three agricultural products.
5. Market differential local tours, particularly the seasonal experiences.

Participation means to join public decision-making, opinion & information sharing, and co-acting. Briefly speaking, the leading rights are released to the public that they may express their requirements and preferences. [3, 4] Participatory Design (Co-design) represents an action process of communication, while planners “listen” to users to realize their opinions (and its origins), and planners also “interpret” with participants to create group senses. Dialogues between professionals and users integrate system knowledge and local experiences thus to avoid bias in design. Participatory design also means the integration among community design, cooperative design and collaborative design. [5] Users catch sight of themselves through participation, which means “subject” involves to contact “object” via “body” and “mind” that the existence in the living world is reviewed. [6]

What had been discussed between the team and the community during the process? The final presentation let the community review how they participated and interacted with the team. Apart from illustrated the propositions, several interactive games were held in order to obtain more feedbacks from the residents and connected themselves tightly. Each task was described thoroughly from identifying system to Longan packaging design, hand-painted maps to colored bamboo cans. Every works were derived from what they have learned from colleges, and the selected ideas were actually put into practice.

A student major in Design may consider design itself means to propose a superb project at his/her best in front of a workshop computer. The participatory design structure discussed here build up a smooth communication platform for designers and users that designers may involve in the specific environment for a deep inspiration. Although this sort of project ends at a certain moment, the subsequent influence would continue contributing to self-development of team members, caring about social issues, self-awareness of community residents, and being positive motive power in public affairs.

6. Conclusions

Soil and Water Conservation Bureau holds the contest of “Touch Rural Village – How Touching” to encourage college students making their direct contact with rural areas by residing and living in communities, realizing communities’ demands in different angles, building up their self-confidence through face-to-face communication, community activities and propositions. Communities benefit from this integrated bottom-up / top-down program and generate a satisfying achievement with the students involved. Comparing to conventional school education and

self-learning models, this participatory design model arouses more creativity and imagination from the students, which contributes to experiment and explore new creating methods and vision. The challenges from the process also inspired these students in terms of execution of their creations. The various interactions and two presentations provided them direct feedbacks and suggestions that we are convinced this learning model would develop more potential from these students comparing to conventional instruction. These students spent their summer time and leave the comfortable environments to devote themselves to an unfamiliar rural community, and they even reacted dynamically to any feedback at sight. An unconventional regeneration & instruction model was established simultaneously, which contribute to both public and education sectors. Hopefully these students would develop wider knowledge and abilities that their efforts are meaningful and worthwhile.

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