

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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DESIGN EDUCATION AS A CHANGE AGENT:

Intersections of Need, Learning and Knowledge Transfer Represented in the Designmatters Initiative

The multiple challenges confronting our world today—geopolitical conflicts, dwindling natural resources, urbanization, and socioeconomic inequalities—represent powerful global forces that are shaping the way we live, work, and learn. Moreover, this is a contemporary context that presents the promise of perpetual connectivity and accelerated patterns in information consumption and creation through an increasingly global digital society. Such pressures and opportunities at an international scale are affecting design education in significant ways, creating an unprecedented need to deliver knowledge, experience, and sophistication in a global playing field. This is a time for remarkable creative reform, realignment, and change in the way designers are called to imagine critical solutions for society's well being into the future. This paper and presentation will focus on two distinct project case studies undertaken under the mantle of a college-wide initiative that is part of a growing movement within the professional design community and design schools alike to align design research and practice with the exploration of social and humanitarian concerns and responsible business practices, as a means of greatly enriching design education and yielding tangible results directly benefiting a wide array of end-users and communities internationally. These two case studies illustrate different aspects of applied design research methodologies that are characteristic of this initiative, and are grounded in cross-pollination of expertise and knowledge transfer among partners from various sectors including academia, NGOs, industry and development agencies. Following below is a brief overview of the two projects, which have been selected for the connection they make between sustainable development issues and design practice across multidisciplinary design fields including industrial, communication and narrative design. The overall argument of the paper is to advocate for open research-driven approaches to complex humanitarian issues where clearly success can be measured by an informed process that allows the truly educated designer to be one who is fully engaged with, and by, the world we all live in.

1. The Mpala Project: Integrated Mobile Health Clinics for Remote Communities

This is a multi-component project (Fig. 1), which was a finalist in the World Bank Development Marketplace Competition in 2007 and is about to enter the initial field-testing stage. It is made possible by a partnership with the Engineering Department of Princeton University and a community-based organization in Northern Kenya, Mpala Community Trust. The proposed design innovations include the first generation prototype for a solar-powered refrigeration unit and mobility system (Fig. 2) meant to maximize healthcare delivery efficiencies via the use of camel caravans that navigate rugged terrain in extremely isolated regions of Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa, and the design of visually based health education materials promoting HIV-AIDS awareness and family planning for the non-literate communities in the region. Key methodologies used to establish a participatory framework with the end-users of the design innovations proposed, as well as the applied research processes and conceptual

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development of the project and first results of the impact of the intervention will be the focus of the discussion.

2. Public Service Awareness Campaign on the Topic of Global Warming

How do you contribute with a fresh perspective that can further discourse and dialogue to a heated global issue that is already receiving worldwide exposure? This case study highlights a series of public service announcements (Fig. 3) entirely conceived by film students that are garnering critical acclaim and international exposure.



Fig. 1: (Left) Jewelry worn by Kenyan women indicating status and stage in life. (Right) Proposed bead designs for the Mpala Health Education Campaign, representing purity and the benefits of a marriage with fewer children.

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Fig. 2: Saddle and solar panel system tested with Princeton University Personnel and Bronx Zoo staff, March 2008.



Fig. 3: Image from the award-winning Public Service Announcement, "Blowing Smoke," one of a series of four PSAs on the topic of climate change and personal responsibility, commissioned by United Nations Department of Public Information, September 2007.