

Creative synergies within a social context

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AUTHOR

Karen Hong
Assistant Professor
School of Art, Design and Media
Nanyang Technological University
81 Nanyang Drive, Level 3, Room 9,
Singapore 637458
Tel: +65 6514 1097
Fax: +65 6795 3140
e-mail: karenhong@ntu.edu.sg
www.ntu.edu.sg/adm

TITLE OF PAPER

Creative Synergies Within A Social Context

This paper is written with reference to a research project conducted from the period of April 2008 to September 2008.

Introduction to the Research Project

This started as an Art & Design Therapy project initiated by University of the Arts London (UAL)¹ and Alexandra Hospital Singapore. 2 Singapore Alumni from UAL, namely Karen Hong (Alumni from Central Saint Martins College of Arts) and Anthony Tan (Alumni from London College of Fashion) were selected to drive this research project.

The project was also done in collaboration with Tanglin Trust School Singapore with a group of 20 students between 13 and 15 years of age, selected to be mentored by the 2 Alumni of UAL.

The initial stage of the project started in early April 2008, where a hospital staff conducted a guided tour and a specific brief was given by the hospital. The area of the Geriatric ward was selected for this project. The Geriatric Ward consists of A Day Care Centre for the elderly, A Clinical Ward, A Geriatric Rehab Centre and a Multi Purpose Hall. The mentors were given the challenge to bring Art and Design to this specific area and it would serve a therapeutic purpose for the elderly. The concept of creating a more natural and tranquil environment by bringing a glimpse of the outside world into the wards and waiting areas was suggested by the mentors and supported by the Hospital.

¹ University of the Arts London brings together six of the world's most famous colleges for the study of art, design, fashion, communication and performing arts. Behind the six colleges are over 100 years of prestige and accomplishment. The colleges are : Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins College of Arts, Chelsea College of Art and Design, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion & Wimbledon College of Art

For 6 months, the mentors worked with the group of 20 students from Tanglin Trust School, they conducted workshops on fundamental design principles, creative thinking and idea development. They also demonstrated a variety of experimentations with different mixed-media and techniques to equip the students with the technical knowledge for their designs.

At the same time, after frequent visits to the hospital, the proposal to use windows as a canvas for the design works was finally presented. That would be a fantastic opportunity to create a stunning environment for the patients, with art that connects the inside with the outside. The hospital accepted the proposal and the final presentation to the Hospital was a range of prints, designed by students and mentors. The resulting imagery represented the luscious and diverse floras and faunas of Singapore. Images were professionally printed on transparent vinyl and installed on 16 windows of the Geriatric ward.

On the evening of the 2nd September 2008, the exhibition, entitled CREATIVE SYNERGIES Within A Social Context was opened by the Guest of Honour, Dr Milton Tan, Director of DesignSingapore Council.

Synopsis

Designing for our Environment has been a common and effective practice in Design Education at the tertiary level for most Singapore design institutions. As for design education at the secondary level, the younger students may not have the relevant exposures to this learning approach. This particular project was set for these young students between the ages of 13 to 15 to exemplify this learning approach of putting design within our environment.

This project also clearly demonstrated the concept of putting “Theory into Practice” in Design Education. Design education has to be contextualised and it should start with young minds of our generation. This group of teenagers managed to understand the needs of their elderly clients and conveyed their message in the form of visual communication which encompasses the below dimensions:

1. Using the visual language appropriately as a visual communication tool to their clients
 - Communicating with the patients and other audiences through a functional platform
2. Creating designs focusing on the fundamentals of design elements and principles
 - Amalgamating design elements and therapeutic capabilities

This paper will further elaborate on these main points and discuss how effective it is for students to learn in a collaborative platform and showcasing what they have learnt in a social context. It will also identify the main learning points for a more effective design education in our Secondary Schools.

Design and Environment

The project kicked off with a guided tour of the Alexander Hospital. A group of 20 students, age 13 to 15, and the mentors were brought around the hospital.

The brief given was to create interesting designs within the specific areas of the geriatric ward with the purpose of creating something that is aesthetically pleasing and visually soothing for the patients. The areas given include both the interior and exterior walls of the whole geriatric ward.

It was clear that the relationship between the design work and the environment is extremely important. The designers have to take into account the suitability of the specific wall to site the design work, and how the design work impacts the space within the environment. The different wall spaces will impact both the positioning of the design work and the meaning conveyed by the works. The design on the exterior walls will pose more issues of concerns. The designers have to be aware of the possible effects of rain and the importance of the changing light when designing for the exterior walls.

As suggested by Elaine Adams stated in her article *“Connections Between Public Art and Art and Design Education In Schools”*, the issue to be considered *“is not whether public artworks would be successful in a gallery, but whether the projects succeed in the context for which they are created and for those for whom they are intended. The most successful outcome may not be a permanent piece of artwork – there may be less tangible and more long-term social, educational and cultural benefits.”*²

Likewise, for the design works to be successful, it would not only have to increase the aesthetic values of the surroundings but would need to serve a therapeutic purpose for the elderly.

These issues were carefully brainstormed and for 6 months, the mentors worked with the group of 20 students. Workshops on fundamental design elements and principles were conducted and students were able to identify specific design elements that are of interest and analyse its application within the context. Students were also led to explore the usage of a range of media and a variety of hand-based techniques together with very basic digital media.

Concurrently, frequent visits to the hospital were made to determine the suitability of specific walls to be used for the design works. After much deliberation, the mentors and students proposed the usage of the windows around the geriatric ward as a canvas for the design works. That would be a fantastic opportunity to create a stunning environment for the patients, with visual images that connect the interior with the exterior. The hospital accepted the proposal and the final presentation to the Hospital was a range of prints,

² Eileen Adams, “Connections Between Public Art and Art and Design Education in Schools”, in Glen Coutts and Tim Jokela (ed.) *Art, Community and Environment – Educational Perspectives* (UK: Intellect Books, 2008). pp. 149

designed by students and mentors. The resulting imagery represented the lush and diverse floras and faunas of Singapore. Images were professionally printed on transparent vinyl stickers and installed on 16 windows of the Geriatric ward.

Learning to Designing a Better Environment

Students were taught to approach their design brief systematically, under the categories of :

- Research
- Artwork exploration
- Critique
- Realization

➤ Research

In order for students to come out with the designs, a good understanding and the purpose of this collaboration has to be apparent. Hence, art as therapy has to be fully understood and frequent visits to the hospital are required to realise the needs of the elderly. With this in mind, the research work started.

Understanding from the staff of the ward, common consequences of aging include decline in motor functions and losing the ability to learn motor skills. Currently patients in the Geriatric Day Care and Rehab Centre are enjoying sessions of art as therapy. These includes basic Chinese paintings and easy to manage handicraft making. Hands-on activities like these allow the patients to practice their motor skills.

It has been proven from research by the hospital that weekly arts and crafts sessions can reinforce motor skills and challenge the patient's creativity.

ART THERAPY OFFERS:³

- *Choices*
- *Decisions (Autonomy)*
- *Accomplishment (Self-esteem)*
- *Social interaction; individual or group*
- *Exercising mind and memory with associations (Using one's past experiences and one's imagination)*
- *Exercising OADL (Other Activities of Daily Living: Listening, Independently acting on instructions given.)*

³ Esther Zeller, "Geriatric Art Therapy" (paper, 2005) Available from Art Dynamics website http://artdynamics.ca/pdfs/articles_text.pdf

BENEFITS OF ART THERAPY:

- *Stimulates memory*
- *Provides an environment for reminiscence and life review*
- *Develops a sense of community through social interaction*
- *Reduces loneliness, depression and anxiety*
- *Offers opportunity to express feelings about aging, illness and loss*
- *Increases ability to focus*
- *Increases feeling of accomplishment and energy level*
- *Engages care providers to feel pride with visual accomplishments of the older adults*

Besides Art Therapy, simple materials and play objects are available for the patients to work on their motor skills. There are several boards with bolts fastened on and patients will practice their motor skills by screwing the lock nuts onto the bolts. The elderly are even encouraged to play mahjong with each other under the supervision of a nursing staff.

➤ **Artwork Exploration**

With the research in mind, the second stage of artwork exploration focuses on the aesthetic and design aspects of the environmental study. It stressed the importance of visual language and spatial understanding.⁴ Teaching students to understand technique is an important stage here. As students develop technique, they learn to use a variety of tools and materials. The mentors demonstrated the use of tools and materials and guide students as they work. Students are meant to learn the varied properties of tools and materials and the range of ways that they can be employed in a skilled and mindful way. Students develop a sense of what they can and cannot do with different tools and materials, and they become more adept at choosing the right tools and materials for the piece they wish to make.⁵

As students develop technique, they also learn about the elements of design, such as line, form, surface, value, textures and colours. They are able to employ the selected elements and combine it with specific principles such as balance, contrast, harmony and unity to create their designs. The lush flora and fauna surroundings of the hospital have encouraged them to use nature as a source of inspiration. Many of them worked with a variety of mixed media to further enhance the imagery with digital media.

The study of colour plays a vital role in the designs. The use of colour will impact the therapeutic qualities of the images. Colour therapy uses colours for their proposed healing abilities in treating emotional and physical disturbances. Changing the colours of clothes or home or office décor or visualizing different

⁴ Eileen Adams, "Connections Between Public Art and Art and Design Education in Schools", in Glen Coutts and Tim Jokela (ed.) Art, Community and Environment – Educational Perspectives (UK: Intellect Books, 2008). pp. 155

⁵ Lois Hetland, Ellen Winner, Shirley Veenema, Kimberly M. Sheridan. Studio Thinking – The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education (New York: Teachers College Press 2007) pp. 33

colours may be recommended. Colour therapy is based on the premise that different colours evoke different responses in people. For example, some colours are considered to be stimulating, whereas others may be soothing.⁶ Only with the right understanding and the correct application of colours, can the therapeutic qualities be enhanced.

➤ Critique

Critical study is primarily concerned with making judgements and the exploration of values. In design, critical study develops skills of connoisseurship, drawing on knowledge of images and design processes that created them, as well as the historical, cultural and social contexts in which they are created. It requires them to work in groups, to compare and contrast their ideas, to formulate views and test their opinions through argument and debate. It requires them to collect and weigh up evidence, develop their capacity for judgement and explain or justify their opinions. Students share ideas, discuss and argue, revealing different viewpoints and differing values.⁷

During the 6 months of studio work, students have to present their ideas through frequent critiques to their peers during work in progress. They also present their work in more formal critiques with parents in a work-in-progress exhibition.

➤ Realization

Students have been able to put their ideas into action to change an environment. The work evolves from developing a new awareness of the unfamiliar environment, i.e. the geriatric ward, and then proceeds through various stages of study, analysis, critique and final implementation.

The final concept was the use of windows as a canvas for the design work. The windows were chosen instead of the wall space because of its ability to be seen on both the interior and the exterior of the wards. The next stage is to test the problem-solving skills of the students: How can design work be mounted onto the windows? Is the transparency of the design crucial when having designs on the windows, as it is necessary to allow patients or visitors to look out of the windows? The best solution was to have designs printed on transparent vinyl stickers. That would be an excellent opportunity to create a stunning environment for the patients, with design that connects the interior with the exterior.

The proposal was presented and the hospital accepted it and the final presentation to the Hospital was a range of prints, designed by students and mentors. The resulting imagery represented the luscious and diverse floras and

⁶ *IntelHealth. Colour Therapy*. Available from

<http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ih/IH/WSIHW000/8513/34968/358753.html?d=dmContent>

⁷ Eileen Adams, "Connections Between Public Art and Art and Design Education in Schools", in Glen Coutts and Tim Jokela (ed.) *Art, Community and Environment – Educational Perspectives* (UK: Intellect Books, 2008). pp. 155

faunas of Singapore. The 'dressed up windows' has developed a sense of place and created a sense of identity and distinctiveness within the geriatric ward.

The final realization of the design prints on the windows has inevitably changed the surroundings of the geriatric ward and from the perspectives of the students, it impacts on these young people's perceptions of place and the meaning it has for them.

Communication through Visual Language

The communication here will be between the students, the patients and the visitors and the staff of the hospital, bringing together the young and the old, the information or message is translated into visual imageries by the young and received by the old. This form of visual communication through the use of visual language comes in a 2-way communication approach :

- *Allowing students to understand the use of visual language through the use of visual imagery as a form to communicate their ideas to their clients*

From the design perspective, the ability to communicate ideas in original and innovative ways is essential for the students. Students will need to use visual imagery effectively to communicate ideas and meaning. Students are encouraged to develop their own visual language by working with a range of methods, materials and media. By using visual language, they can apply the formal elements of image making, e.g. line, tone, texture, scale, colour, shape and form employed analytically or intuitively and based on expression or feeling; creating impressions; compositions; visual ideas; illustrations; bringing together elements into a synthesized whole. The form that images take and the media and techniques used to communicate visual meaning, will vary according to students' specialism. They include drawing, painting, photography, collage, printmaking and digital media. With these skills taught, students can communicate an intended meaning to a specified audience by using visual language.

- *Allowing patients, visitors or staff of the hospital to understand the designs and believing in the benefits of creative design work in our environment and that it can be therapeutic*

From the receiving end, in order for the viewers to understand the designs, the imagery has to mean something to them. This led to nature being chosen as a theme where it is almost universal that nature and greeneries provides solace and respite. Therefore, floral motifs and leaves patterns are repeated rhythmatically in the designs.

Similarly, the colours used in the designs should also be able to calm emotions and therefore different tonal range of nature related colours and

well-balanced colour schemes are predominantly used. The overall feel of the design has to be aesthetically pleasing and visually soothing for the patients.

Students have done well here, creating a series of designs that are able to evoke the intended emotions of the target audiences, and achieve the goal of infusing therapeutic functions into their works.

Conclusion

The aesthetics within the geriatric ward's environment has been transformed with a purpose. The designs have not only enhanced the physical space, it has also served its therapeutic purpose for the elderly.

This interesting collaboration between design education and application into the design of the environment clearly spells out the importance of putting theory into practice as a concept for design education. We cannot expect to achieve this outcome from traditional classroom-centred learning. A critical stance towards the world surrounding us and the need for collaboration with our peers in other social sectors has become a cornerstone of modern educational practice.⁸

It has been very encouraging to see the final outcome of this project. Students have been extremely motivated and they have worked very hard to go through the creative process and have gained extensive experience in designing and implementing their design in a real world context. As quoted by Timo Jolela in the paper "Collaborative Project-Based Studies in Art Teacher Education: An Environment Perspective", the benefits do not stop there - an art education system that places community and environmental values at its centre has a positive influence on other disciplines across the entire social spectrum.⁹ As in this context, it is design education and the success of this project that has also raised the profile of the local secondary design education in Singapore.

⁸ Timo Jokela "Collaborative Project-Based Studies In Art Teacher Education: An Environmental Perspective", in Glen Coutts and Tim Jokela (ed.) [Art, Community and Environment – Educational Perspectives](#). (UK: Intellect Books 2008). pp 220

⁹ Ibid. pp. 237

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APPENDICES

A. Press Release

B. Photos of the Windows @ Alexander Hospital

C. Opening of Exhibition

**D. Working in the studio with Students from Tanglin
Trust School**

A. Press Releases

1. The Straits Times

Headline	Students bring a smile with art		
Date	03. Sep 2008	Language	ENGLISH
Media Title	The Straits Times (Home) (Mon - Wed)		
Section	Home	Article Size	234 cm2
Page No	B3	Frequency	Daily
Circulation	389248	Color	Full Color
Readership	1167744	AdValue	12433.51



ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

Students bring a smile with art

Fifteen pieces of art now grace the windows of Alexandra Hospital's Geriatric Centre. The prints, which make the windows look like stained glass, were done by students of Tanglin Trust School, aged 14 to 17.

The works were part of a year-old collaboration between the school, the hospital and Britain's University of the Arts London. The students were inspired by plants in the hospital's garden.

"When people are not well, or worried about someone, they need beautiful things to bring a smile to their faces," said the hospital's chief executive Liak Teng Lit.

One young artist, Kate Phillips (above), 14, wanted to include an orchid motif so that her piece had some relevance to Singapore.

"I hope my work will make the patients happy," she said.

MELISSA SIM

2. TODAY

Headline **Window Therapy**
Date **03. Sep 2008**
Media Title **Today (Mon - Fri)**
Section **Singapore News**
Page No **3**
Circulation **180000**
Readership **540000**

Language **ENGLISH**
Article Size **109** cm2
Frequency **Daily**
Color **Full Color**
AdValue **1339.20**



WINDOW THERAPY



Twenty-five Tanglin Trust School students, aged between 13 to 16 years old, brighten up Alexandra Hospital's Geriatric Centre with window art featuring Singapore's lush green foliage and vibrantly-coloured flowers. The University of Arts London, Tanglin Trust School and the hospital collaborated to produce 15 large-scale window-mounted prints which were designed and developed with creative contributions not just from students, teachers and healthcare professionals, but also from patients.

KOH MUI FONG

B. Photos of the Windows

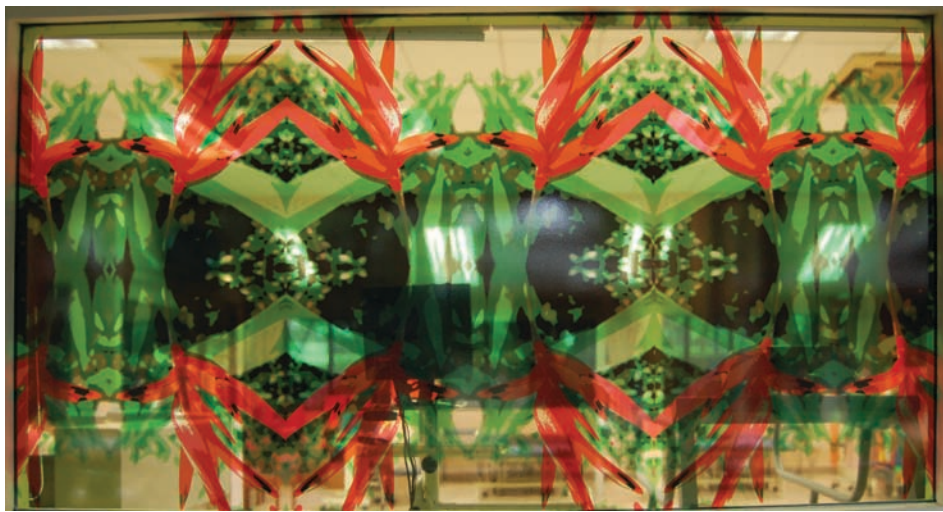
BEFORE



AFTER











C. OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION : 2 September 2008



Dr Liak Teng Kit - CEO of Alexander Hospital



Dr Milton Tan – Director of DesignSingapore Council (Guest of Honour for opening)



CEO of Tanglin Trust School – Steven Andrews



Director of International Development, University of the Arts London - Bob Masterton



left to right : Anthony Tan – Alumni of UAL, Serene Yong – Local representative of UAL, Colin Kerrigan – Deputy Director of UAL, Karen Hong - Alumni of UAL, Robert Le-Grice – Head of Art Tanglin Trust, Bob Masterton - Director of UAL and Steven Andrews - CEO Tanglin Trust



Tanglin Trust student in the exhibition



Exhibition of students' works, sketchbooks and process works were showcased to show the thought process of the project.



Exhibition



Working in the studio with the students

Karen Hong
Assistant Professor
PGCert, Higher Education, National Institute of Education
MA, Textile Design, Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design
BA, Visual Arts, Curtin University of Technology

Tel: +65 6514 1097
Mobile : +65 9871 6776
Email : karenhong@ntu.edu.sg
Website : www.tactiletextiles.com

Karen Hong is currently an Assistant Professor from Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media.

She is trained as a Visual Artist in Curtin University of Technology, Western Australia. She majored in Jewellery Design and minored in Ceramics and Fibre / Textiles. Her interest in surface design and knowledge in these three areas of specialisation allows her to explore techniques in different mediums. She continued furthering her studies in Central St. Martins College of Arts and Design in London, UK specialising in the area of Fashion Textiles.

She has been with the Art and Design education in Singapore for more than 10 years and had taught in Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts. Before joining the School of Art, Design and Media, she was an Assistant Director with DesignSingapore Council. She managed the Design Culture Unit and spearheaded the collection of Singapore design statistics, and conducted a study on the Singaporeans Design Awareness Index. She also planned and launched the inaugural DesignSingapore Scholarship.

As for professional practice, she has been working on one-offs textile designs as well as commercial fashion fabrics and fabrics for accessories under the label "TACTILE TEXTILES". (www.tactiletextiles.com)

Her recent explorations are in the area of thermoplastic fabrics, working with thermoplastics in the form of fabrics and yarns. She is testing out if these thermoplastics can be given a 3D form regardless of construction methods and amalgamation with different surface design techniques which may change the physical and aesthetic properties of the thermoplastics.

She has recently presented her research during the "State of Design Festival" in Melbourne, Australia in July 2009. An exhibition of the textiles and a workshop has been conducted and this has been made possible with a \$6000 grant given from DesignSingapore Council.

Karen has recently completed a "Healing Art" project with Alexander Hospital, a project initiated by University of the Arts London and Tanglin Trust School. She designed and also guided a group of students from Tanglin Trust School in designing a series of art works to be used as healing art at the Geriatric Ward within the Alexander Hospital. The Outcomes of research culminate in an exhibition, entitled 'Creative Synergies Within a Social Context' and was opened on the 2 September 2008 by Director of DesignSingapore Council, Dr Milton Tan

She will further develop a series of SMART Textiles that will also be used as therapy for the patients of the Geriatric Ward together with University of the Arts London.