

Engagement as a design tool

Maad Maggie Sun

Architecture is closed to the people who use it, the buildings with people's memory, ideas, feelings is always moving and lively. Engagement is a good way to get this information, in the process "the future user" can improve your ideas and proposals, help you understand the project deeply, it may help to shape your brief.....It is a tool for design development. In this essay, there is an interview from the bureau of design research Leo Care about the process of engagement and design, some practical methods used in the engagement and two case study of how to use the materials from it into design.

M: How you begin the consultation for a project?

L: Each project we try to give it a sense of process and then take it into outcomes. We take time to try to find information from people before making any decisions, just tap in and watch the social and culture contexts in that area, talk with people about what the area like, what the people like , what is they dislike. Then we pick up strands, stories and narratives that give us information which we try to visualize and then we give it back to the people and said this is what we taken from your describe, this is what we think important about your place. Building on what is important we can lift up the elements which will drive the design process.

M: How do you use the narrative?

L: In different ways, sometimes it maybe a strong narrative which may drive the whole regeneration project; sometimes it maybe a short narrative which may encircle the project, we break it down into small stories, each one talks about an aspect, like housing, public ground, social...

M: When you begin an interview, what kind of question should you ask?

L: You should never ask questions too generally, ask questions like "what" "how" "where" to make people response creatively, maybe the questions people will be happy with. What we might do is to make a timeline, ask people to fill in what events have happened in that area, you can talk with them while they are filling, you got a description. What we try to do is not go with a questionnaire and ask, can you fill it simply, the key is to start a discussion, then you can get more rich information. You need to be more flexible enough to start dialogue, not have preconception to what the answer going to be. It is easy to get answer about what the area might like, but if you do that, your mind is too closed. Yes you need to have framework, you need to be flexible to have boarder things.

M: How do you fix the framework and make them lead the consultation?

L: Sometimes we use a series of images which may focus on problems, the activities happened in that area, possibilities for what could happen. We also like to talk with people about their dreams, and help them find out what they want from the area, to encourage people think creatively. Doing model is another way, that is very nice and important because it literally lift people above life, take to the different aspects you view for it, it give people the opportunities to look at things in different ways.

M: A kind of architectural way.

L: Yes, sometimes you got the map of that place, as soon as you put it on the table, you got chances to discuss with people, people can mark where they park, where they live. As an architect, you can immediately find what things might be occurring, what the problem is, what can be improved.

M: Then you can put the possibility and problems into the design brief.

L: Absolutely, the first stage of the process is to define a brief, you may have a brief from a funding body in terms what you need, then define the brief from people's response take that forward.

M: Then after that, do you need people's opinion?

L: The best process is when you can engage people from that point and bring people along in the project.

M: I think narrative is often used way in your projects, can you talk more about it?

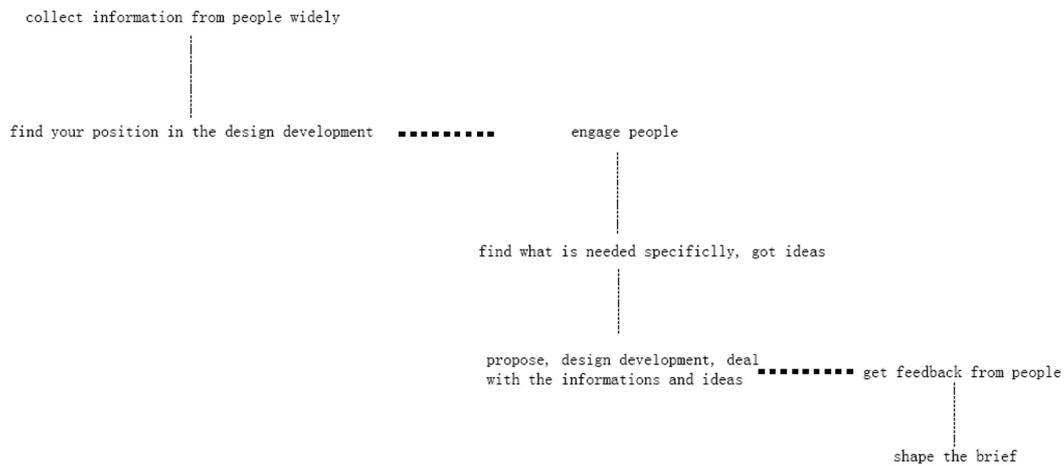
L: You can start from the stories, accommodate for the information you got from people, also from site analysis, bring them together. We do photomontages of the place, bring in images, quite open and free drawings.

We also do a series of master plannings, diagrams try to make sense of information from people. And then it is about your design process, where you play around, throw your ideas around, we might propose the project within the area. And then we organize workshop, take these elements together, organize them in a different way.

M: How do you run the workshop?

L: Sometimes you have got an idea, sometimes you want to propose things, you go back to people saying that "okay, this is what we think is important from what you said ,what we understand". Then you can take something forward, done something good or not, this kind of feedback mechanism is very important.

(Showing me the examples on their website)This is a jigsaw workshop, based on the map, actually we made different elements. People can literally move them around, shift it. This is the suggestion of activities might happen in that area. When the doing the workshop people can make models, you can get people to make comments about the area, good points, bad points using premade flags. This the dream capture, what they dream about. This is a diagramme analyzing the physical elements and try to talk about each theme for each part, try to give them a kind of identity. With these montages we create very simple strands or lines or titles which towards a narrative. We are not talking about gate way, we are talking about the celebration, coming to the park. We just try to make the place more playful.



After knowing the process of engagement, I want to analyze a few methods for it.

1 Performance on site

In the book << This would never happen in Accrington >>, an architecture student Claudia danced in a market hall, this made people stopped, watched and talked, then the other students talked with them about the market, what it was and what it could be. The site is changeable, a market could be a stage, a factory could be a museum..... In this case, performance provoked the possibility of the site, not only in the function but also people's talk about it. Sometimes people have activities because there already are something happened there, architect can give himself a role of making something happen.

2 Interview people

In my project, I made a derive in London Thames bank, I set myself a role of a person stayed in UK for four months and then interview people. I told them who I am and let them tell me if they were me, where would they want to go, using this method, I got many creative answers from people.

What kind of information we want to get is related to the aim of design. We design to make a place better, change it into another use, or solve some problems. It depends on the view of architect to the project. As far as the information the design product expresses to people, sometimes architects can intensify the character of the site, sometimes can challenge people's thinking of the place, can express a unique idea about one thing, can share a common sense.....The questions we asked include the objective and the subjective, the good and bad points, the past and the future, the possibilities, what people get from that area, what they want from that area, what they think about the area.....

Bearing these questions in mind, we can go to interview people. However, asking people these questions directly is not a wise method, we should make a dialogue

about that with people. There are some small skills for talking with people. Sometimes talking with people about what they are doing is a good beginning. We should pay attention to the environment of the interview, for example you can not get a pleasant conversation when a person is hurry doing something. Also we should be aware if the questions we ask will make people feel comfortable, for example you ask a poor person about his living status, you should have some art of conversation.

The personal questions will make people happy to talk with you, I remember the experience I talk with a mother about her travel to Borough market because of seeing the postcard to Canada. The more specific you ask, the more willing they are to talk with you, sometimes exchange ideas with them can make the dialogue more interesting and creative. While the personal, detailed information is effective for our design.

3 Mapping

a. Idea mapping:

We can use mapping to gather people's ideas, with post-it notes, labels or flags. In my live project, we use a cardboard-wall to let people write on. Then we work on it, find out what thing they think is important as well as the things having been neglected by us. When you put the ideas about one theme, you can get more detail information, after abstraction, you can get a clear understanding of it



There is an interesting website I found about the mapping the everyday life in tags. The mapping of people's culture activities composed a picture of urban culture life, which is immaterial, but real and live.

[http://www.folkestoneconomy.net/info/#1\(1\)](http://www.folkestoneconomy.net/info/#1(1))

b. Memory & Future mind mapping

Methods to let people draw the journey from home to where they are, showing the landmarks or the memorable moments, the same way can be used into the future to imagine how an area can be changed.

c. Route map:

Ask people to draw their route and the positive and negative aspects which determined their route as well as the hot-spots, non-go areas and places of personal significant.

4 Story-telling

Let people tell you about the story happened on the site on themselves, this will help to make situation for design.

5 Interactive events

Holding a series events like workshops and exhibitions is a way to make people feel part of the project, think and express creatively, it is also a automatically selecting and eliminating process.

As in << This is what we do >>, "...Shadowing the gradual sharpening of the collaboration was the realization that consultation can mean the expansion of the client body, can be a means of developing the brief, to affirm or question intuitive

response to a site, the exchange of information ...”(2)Once we have these materials from engagement, we should think carefully how to use them into the design. It is quite often we have massive materials of detailed stories, ideas, but what is the meaning of those? What can they tell us?

I want to analyze a formula $d(\text{detail})/s(\text{strategy})=\text{DETAIL}$ used by muf in their art work as a basic way to deal with the materials.

1. The close interrogation of the up close and personal(detail)
2. The extraction of what the personal can tell you about the general(strategy)
3. The reformulation of the strategy in here and now: a small scale construction about of future “what if...”(DETAIL)(3)

In the project “ a car-free London”, they aimed to envision a car free London with urban strategy. Muf began with the “detail feeling” a car can give people like “comfort, reassurance, luxury and glamour”, then they abstract these feelings into “ security, pleasure and mobility”, at last they proposed “ 24-hour tram loop links security places” “ extend and borrow the pleasure for street and park” “mobility is found along the desire lines of social mobility crossing the city” The whole process “ describe---abstract---reconstruct” is very useful as a way to deal with the stuffs. Because when we look at these stuffs separately, we can only be confused, comparatively, if we understand them as a whole, they become reasonable and associated with each other, then these side stuff will be meaningful and can give the place an clear identity..

How to depict the story with language of building? It is said that “ The literal components of buildings can embody ideas.”(4) You can use light and shadow, geometry, shape, line, colour, scale, texture, circulation all kinds of ways to depict it. You may use a narrow drak space to describe a secret, you may use a series repeated elements to show a song. In muf’s Walsall Art Gallery project, they made the perimeter walls “pulled back deep into the interior of the building and back out to the building line”, it leaves a scoop of semi- street/semi-building.” At the same time, the structural strategy reflects the relationship of exhibition to its viewers “give and take” using “pull and push”. All kinds of language can be used to describe the story.

There is a good example showing the architects through engagement got a comprehensive and deep understanding of the area and make active responces to that: the Fluid’s project of “Derwent Gateway Centre”.



The masterplan identified a strategy of an Active Edge linked to three neighbourhood centres, the project worked as attractors to people outside the Derwent, raising the profile of the area to generate to get back to the community, in terms of sports and leisure facilities.....At first, people in the community wanted to build a landmark building which will regenerate the whole area, then the architects made models and drawings to get their ideas, color workshop, meeting for discussing space, form, they developed a long list of essential requirements. Finally, the building came up with three parts---

The Cedar cladding of the stand echoes the original structure of the old grandstand building, in response to the collective memory of that area.



The translucent Rodeca cladding to the academy hall provides a skin that undercuts the mass of the hall, achieves internal daylight and at night produces what appears to be a shimmering, skeletal object.



The use of horizontally paneled, multi-coloured polycarbonate cladding on the peanut responds to the desire to create a friendly, energetic and memorable building that lives up to its landmark status.

In this case, we can find the engagement is a bi-directional process, in the community people's view, architects help them find and fulfill their desire for where they live, in the architects' view, the community people give them the brief of design. It is in this interactive process creates an expressive building.

Engagement should become a consciousness in architects' mind, the way we thinking , the issues we care about decide the methods of engagement, at the same time, the engagement can shape ideas and proposals, the way of dealing with engagement materials can also applied into those subjective, social information.

Bibliography:

1 <http://www.folkeconomy.net/info/#1>

2<< This is what we do>>MUF, Katherine Shonfield and Adrian Dannatt, first published in 2001, page 11

3<< This is what we do>> MUF, Katherine Shonfield and Adrian Dannatt, first published in 2001, page 14-15

4<< This is what we do>> MUF, Katherine Shonfield and Adrian Dannatt, first published in 2001, page 100