

国際シンポジウム  
「多様性の中に循環型社会の未来を探る」  
論文集

Proceedings of  
the International Symposium on  
“Pursuing Sustainable Societies in Diverse Environments”

Kobe, 27th-29th June, 2003

神戸大学  
Kobe University

日本学術会議農村計画学研究連絡委員会  
Science Council of Japan,  
National Committee for Rural Planning

**Learning from local wisdom:  
Towards a sustainable community development strategy**

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**Part 1:**

Arguments for participation in sustainable development often focus on environmental justice and empowerment issues. While the strength of these arguments are without doubt critically important and must be actively pursued, there still remains a question of design, or more pointedly, of "form". Some would suggest that so often when we focus exclusively on the goals of just and equal participation for the disaffected communities, we still end up with poorly designed physical environments. Thus, as community planners and designers, we need to pursue good design as well as seeking participation as a goal. Yet others may counter that, if one had to make a choice, it would be more important to achieve environmental justice than good design.

I would like to suggest another way of approaching sustainability. In a fully participatory society, i.e., a just society, I imagine that "good design" occurs instinctively. I am of the position that there is power in the "local wisdom" to produce good design. This wisdom is collective and multi-faceted. It is both cultural and social, and it is inclusive rather than exclusive. However, too often this wisdom has been stifled by more powerful forces. The task of community design ought to be the rediscovery of collective energy so that a fully participatory society is reconnected with the wisdom of good design.

This part aims to provide case study evidence of the existence of "local wisdom" in the community. The participatory dynamics of the "local wisdom" will be described in some detail in order to demonstrate interactions among the participants, and between the community and the designer / planner. First, we will examine a case at Dong-Kang in I-lan County where the community generated the form without the input of the designer. This case study is then used in comparison to participation by the community in the I-lan Performing Arts Theater Project.

A cross-examination will be made between these projects to discuss the depth and variety of collective action. We will show that a collective social process in design generates unexpected forms which very often surpasses the creativity and quality of forms generated by designers.

**Dong-Kang Hammocks:** <sup>(1)</sup>

In I-lan County, 75 Km east of Taipei, where I-lan River meets the Pacific Ocean, there is a small fishing village called Dong-Kang. The village consists of about 50 houses tugged behind a sand dune protected from the north-east winds. The one narrow winding road in the village terminates at the river dike. Here on the top of the dike at the mouth of the river, villagers gather on hot summer evenings to catch the breeze and to gossip. About fifteen years ago, the elders sat on the dike one evening and imagined how nice it would be during the hot afternoons to have trees on the dike to sit under. The local officials provided 20

banyan tree seedlings which the villagers planted in two neat rows along the top of the dike. They were placed roughly 3m apart and the two rows are about 5m in width. People adopted the young banyans and took care of them in friendly competition with their neighbors. With love and care, all the banyans grew rapidly and in a few years they had become large enough to form a tree tunnel on the dike. The villagers made a light bamboo armature to form a vault shape to support the branches. Over time, the tree tunnel took on a distinct vault form. Now as the trees grew large and sturdy, one elder fisherman took some old fish net material, made a hammock and tied it between the first two tree trunks along the edge of the dike. One happy doze in the hammock had all the neighbors busy making their own hammocks. In a very short time, there appeared two neat and orderly rows of hammocks hung between the trees. Lying in the hammock on a hot sleepy afternoon, sunlight filters through the banyan leaves which gently flutters among the woven pattern of the hammocks. A light breeze comes in from the mouth of the river cooled by the river weeds. Far off in the distance one can glimpse the thin line of the ocean set against rising hills even further away. It's quiet except for the slight flutter of the leaves.

Later in the afternoon and much later into the evening, the banyan tree tunnel would come alive with men playing checkers, women gossiping and doing chores, children on tricycles and playing games. And families who have decided to have their evening supper under the trees.

The environmental quality of this particular setting is unmistakable. It is both physical (form) and social (content). It is multi-dimensional and multi-layered. It is undeniably an expression of an active, healthy and self-confident cultural process alive and well in the late 20th century.

This example of a good design is surely very common among all cultures of the world. In Japan, in America, and in all parts of the world, there are countless such active processes that are creating good designs. One distinct characteristic of all of these good designs is that they were all made by ordinary people, not professionals and not even community planners and designers. To put it boldly, I am not aware of any designer's work that can approach the level of quality of the banyan dike. As "progressive", "activist" community planners and designers, then, what is our purpose and our objective relative to the creation of form? To try to answer this question, I shall discuss an actual work example and analyze it in the light of the Dong-Kang case.

### **The design of a theater in I-lan:** <sup>(2)</sup>

A public theater for the County of I-lan was commissioned to us. We began by an intensive participatory planning phase wherein the program as well as the form of the stage was determined. That we reached a daring decision to build the first thrust stage theater in Taiwan is reflective of the degree of collaboration among the planning committee members as well as the vision of the county government. The planning committee was composed of academics and experts in the field of performing arts. The consensus was that Taiwan needs different kinds of high-quality performing stages, (different from the prevalent proscenium stage) and that I-lan is a good place to take a lead in a new direction. Decision making during the planning phase remains at a policy level where the arguments were about the pros and cons of a thrust stage versus a proscenium stage, not about the actual design of the theater.

With a decision to design a thrust stage theater, we proceeded to involve local residents, especially the elderly people who liked to gather in the park for informal singing and performing of the local opera. We also sought out local performing groups, not just the popular opera companies, but also other groups such as children's theater group, puppet groups, etc. Then we surveyed the whole range of possible performances that could use a thrust stage which then included musical performances as well as new avant-garde, and experimental theater.

Here I want to focus on one instance of how the entrance to the theater took its form. As we began to know more about the dynamics of local theater, we realized that local performance is most alive when: 1) it is performed out in the open air on a make-shift stage, and 2) it involved mobile acts, a procession and / or actors mixing with the audience. These two key ingredients also seem to be important to many other types of group performances.

Translating this into form, we faced questions of how to make the interior space more open, how to connect the inside and the outside, and how to allow a mixing of audience and actor.

One day while talking to a group of performers about these questions, someone said that what we ought to do is to make it possible for an out-door procession with music, drums, and street dancers to go through the neighborhoods, attracting audience along the way and carrying them all the way into the theater for the finale, as you would do at an open air stage in front of a temple square. Then specifically, a large opening is needed from the street into the theater and as you come in, the procession can come directly onto the thrust stage. Now, while this conception of the opening was being described verbally, I quickly drew a diagram to show its shape and size. From this diagram we slowly worked out the details of the entrance way which, combined with the thrust stage, is now a key distinction of this theater.

Of course the actual participatory process was more convoluted than I have just summarized. There were long and inconclusive discussions about the traditional and the contemporary, about local performing arts and cosmopolitan views, about moving versus stationary performances, etc. We, as designers, had also reflected long and hard on the formal implication of any or all of these ideas. This period of gestation, perhaps several months without a direction nor a clear decision, culminated in a very ordinary and almost matter-of-fact instant when a clear idea about use, i.e., a large and wide entry opening from the lobby extending to the stage, occurred almost simultaneously with the spatial diagram of the entry way. The moment when the conception of use and the form of that use are connected together passed almost without notice. It was not a moment of sudden flash of insight or a mysterious appearance of inexplicable form. In retrospect, the moment was simply a natural and agreeable conclusion of an issue of concern to many participants. No one could claim sole authorship of the design, but all participants contributed to its creation.

#### **Analysis:**

Is the one instance in the design of the theater comparable to the creation of the Banyan tree tunnel and the hammocks?

There are obvious differences between the two cases. At Dong-Kang, the participants are mostly elderly

fisherman whose families have known each other for generations. For them, basic life values are common and understood. So when one person comes up with a good idea for something, it is easily assimilated by the group as a whole. That is, the distance between the individual and the community is short and direct. This is clearly demonstrated by the creative process of the Banyan tree tunnel and the making of the hammocks. In the theater, it involved many different participants ranging from experts to local performing groups to elderly people in the park. The process of reaching a moment of community creativity was circuitous and unpredictable. Community, in this case, is an artificially construed idea and is far removed from the individual participants.

A part of this artificiality is the intervention by professional planners and designers. As mentioned before, in the case of Dong-Kang, from the very beginning to the creation and use of hammocks on the dike, there was no professional intervention. One may of course argue that indeed the fishermen are real professionals, but they are professionals only in the sense that they know how to make fish nets. Yet here, they were able to create a place of distinctive quality. In the theater, it is true that without the intervention of the professional planners and designers, the theater could not be built. Just as the fisherman is an expert on fish nets, the designer is an expert in making a building stand up. What remains unclear is the rest of it, the vast amount of knowledge and wisdom that are needed to create a place like the Banyan Dike and the theater. It is not at all certain that the designer is contributing to this reservoir of knowledge and wisdom. The one instance in the case of the large open entry way into the theater may be a very small exception where the participation of the designer may have enhanced community creativity.

In Dong-Kang the cultural process, living with each other and knowing each other in thought and action, has been on-going for a long time. It is a part of the history and life of the village. When the need for the trees and the hammocks became a community issue, it was dealt with as with any other communal problem in the village. There is a built-in social mechanism to handle such an issue. It takes a long time, years and years of gestation, for that social mechanism to mature and to be able to handle issues collectively. It also requires that social relations remain steady and predictable over a long time. On the other hand, the moment of community creativity is short and almost instantaneous, almost as an expected outcome of some on-going collective process. In the theater, the process seemed reversed. Because the theater is a public project detached from the everyday life of the communities, the creation of the theater did not have a communal gestation period. In contrast to the Banyan Dike, the design of the theater took a long time, about 8 years. During this time, the designer was able to partially simulate a process of communal gestation, as in the case of the entry opening, and to reach a formal outcome that is the result of community creativity. The temporal dimension of participatory design process are distinctions that need to be addressed.

Another difference between the two cases is the relationship between function and aesthetics (value assigned to form). In the Banyan Dike case, function appears paramount, form is almost an afterthought. Yet the resultant form is of high aesthetic value, in the sense that users assign meaning to the Banyan tunnel and the hammocks. In the theater, because it is a public project and because the designer is not a member of the community, the question of form and its aesthetics became a conscious one to be dealt with. However, in the case of the entry opening, we focused on the functional needs and let the form evolve

