creative synergies
within a social context

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Introduction

This started as an Art & Design Therapy project initiated by University of the Arts London (UAL) 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.

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

Window Panels before installation of Designs

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.

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, 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 stickers and installed on 16 windows of the Geriatric ward.

Window Panels after installation of Designs

Methodology

Learning to Designing a Better Environment
Students were taught to approach their design brief systematically, under the categories of :

- Research
- Artwork exploration
- Critique
- Realization

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 elderly, the information or message is translated into visual imageries by the young and received by the elderly. 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

- 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

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.

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.

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