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Exploring the Concept of Interactive Patina of Culture

Abstract

Designing for different cultures is a mandatory discipline of Industrial Design in our modern, globalized world. We observe that this has a first world touch most of the time: industrialized countries designing for less developed countries, where the design is often only executed and products are manufactured. This results in a clear mismatch of artifacts and culture. In this paper, we present the results of a workshop on designing for cultures and introduce the concept of the Interactive Patina of Culture as a different take on this. This more balanced concept spans from designer and the process of designing to the resulting designs and products. The concept is backed by our field exploration during the workshop where designers of two cultures meet and jointly realize the Interactive Patina of Culture in several products.

Introduction

The concept of Interactive Patina of Culture is a concept in the space between cultural studies, experience design and human-computer interaction. It is one way to understand recent globalization in design, namely not in terms of cross-cultural design as a one-fits-all formula, but instead as a set of different designs centered around a common rationale, but rooted in different cultural contexts. At the same time, "patina" conveys the understanding that time and use of artifacts will result in ageing, in becoming closer to the person and cultural identity of the user, also known as "graceful ageing", however, this cannot be limited to the designed artifacts: the process of designing and the designer are likewise to be included in this notion. That means that design practice and the designer will – over time – work in, with, and for a cultural context.

Recently we organized a student workshop around the concept of 'Interactive Patina of Culture'. The workshop was setup in China (Suzhou area) with participants both from the Netherlands and China. Our aim was to investigate mechanisms for cooperation on the basis of equality, by means of bringing students from two cultures together. The assignment of the workshop was to design a series of interactive public installations to be located in the city of Taicang. The concept of Interactive Patina of Culture acted as a mechanism to bring qualities of the two cultures together.

In the following, we will give a short introduction on the background of this concept, how it developed and how we pursue its further development in a cross-cultural setting. Rather than bringing the concept full circle we see this paper as 'work-in-progress' and as an instrument to further our understanding the concept of 'Interactive Patina of Culture', which will be instrumental in preparing for the next workshop that will elaborate on the topic.

The concept of 'Interactive Patina of Culture'

The concept of 'interactive patina of culture' (IPC) is a multi-layered concept, which will be explained in the following by briefly unpacking the elements that make up the concept. By doing so we move from a rather metaphorical starting point, as most would anticipate the now decontextualized word patina, towards a deeper understanding of it, beyond the literal application:

A patina is often understood as a trace of repeated use, as a slight and partial erosion of an object's surface caused by an agent gradually and over time. The stem of a hammer acquires a sheen, a polish of repeated use by a carpenter. This polish tells a story about how an object was used.

Connecting the concept of 'patina' to 'culture' changes the meaning of it. We posit that culture 'rubs off' onto the artifacts in use. That is to say the artifacts in a culture are shaped by the values of that culture; they are part of the patina of culture. This is best elucidated by an example: during the workshop in China the authors of this paper felt intrigued by a particular rolling pin in the kitchen section of a local supermarket. A few days later one of the Chinese hosts asked us which variant of rolling pin we were so interested in, and explained that different varieties of rolling pins exist that have different thicknesses and lengths and these properties are instrumental in the type of dough that is created when using them. To us this told stories about how the way that food is enjoyed has influence on how it is made. The values of a culture are expressed in the artifacts that it produces.

Connecting interactivity to the concept of 'patina of culture' extends the concept further, but not in ways that we could immediately predict, i.e. in terms of graceful ageing and degradation in interaction design [4, 5]. In contrast, this was for us the challenge for exploration. Still, we did not extend the concept towards interactivity without reason. Bringing inter-activity to the concept of 'patina of culture' gave the participants of the workshop the opportunity to explore how they could express the qualities of their cultures in interactive ways. Thus it extends the concept of 'patina of culture' beyond the artifact into new territories where the dynamism of culture is opened up and explored and where cooperation is both a mechanism to come to insights and a result.

The workshop

The workshop took place in Taicang, a city near Shanghai and had an intentionally multi-cultural character: we explored new ways to cooperate between different cultures by bringing students and staff from different universities and continents together for two weeks. Thirty-six Chinese students and nine students from the Netherlands participated and formed nine project-groups. The project-brief was the following:

Interactive Patina of Culture: Design an interactive installation that engages the public in the act of transforming a nondescript public space into a classy dwelling. It lets the space meaningfully grow by the interactions with the public. These interactions range from the intentional to the implicit behavior. Thus the public is instrumental in growing a valuable and thus socially meaningful public image of their city.

Below we present three case studies that were produced in the workshop:

Figure 1. Interactive Fountain

Interactive Fountain. There is a Chinese tale of red carps jumping over a dragon gate. In the tale, if a red carp swims hard enough against the stream, it will reach a dragon gate. If the carp tries hard enough to jump high out of water, it will jump over the gate and become a dragon. Over the years this tale have been used as a metaphor for encouraging people to study to change their own lives and for endorsing the support for one's study from the family and the society. "There is nothing more noble than studying" (Ancient Chinese saying).

The Interactive Fountain uses back projection to project animated red carps to a (real, physical) water fountain, see figure 1. The carps swim at a lower part of the fountain and they seem to be trying hard to swim to higher

positions in the fountain. One can "support" a carp by placing a hand next to it to bring it to a higher level in the fountain. This goes on until it reaches a certain height in the fountain where it then jumps over the gate.

The installation refers to the ancient tale of the carp and engages the public in bringing the carp to higher levels. It makes the audience aware of the importance of education, but also of the cyclic nature of generations following each other and supporting each other.

Figure 3. Moon Rising from Sea

Figure 2. The Temple Puzzle

Temple Puzzle. Chinese temples are built of wood, with stone elements. Often these temples burnt down either by accident or during wars. It has always been a tradition for people to contribute to the effort of rebuilding these temples on the ruins. A ruin of an old temple is located in one of the parks of Taicang, one of the student groups took this as inspiration for their interactive installation.

The Temple Puzzle installation uses the ruin of the temple as a real-world tangible interface for children to rebuild the temple that once stood there, see figure 2. The act of jumping on the stones from the ruins of the temple will reveal the original look of a certain part of the temple that is related to the stones. The new temple is projected on a canvas that is located close to the ruin. The installation uses an existing ruin to reinterpret the tradition of communally rebuilding the fragile wooden temples of before in case they burnt. The installation was meant as a means of playfully educating children about the significance of the past. Teaching them something about their culture but also relating their environment and even their actions to their history.
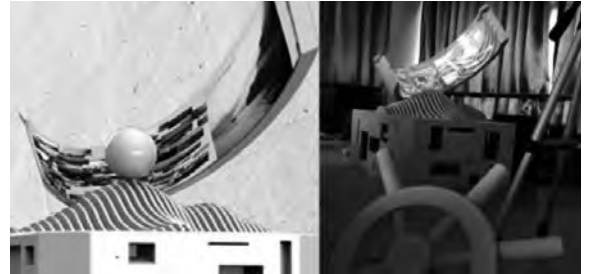
Moon Rising from Sea. Taicang is a natural sea port and became the number one port of the world in the Ming dynasty, where Zheng He set off his voyages to explore the world [1]. Taicang's cultural heritage is deeply rooted in being a seaport to the world ever since. Recently Taicang decided to exploit this past importance and fame. A building is planned that symbolizes the cultural significance of Taicang's seaport. This building is roughly 10 by 10 meters on its base and 8 meters high and it features a large sail, and the moon rising from the waves on its roof.

The installation of Moon Rising from Sea utilize this building to allow the public to contribute their photos from social media, for an interactive photo show projected on the sail, see figure 1. People from Taicang, who live and work overseas, will be able to send back photos and show to the people of Taicang what they are doing and seeing elsewhere in the world. Local viewers are able to browse through the photos by turning a steering wheel.

The installation enables both people who have left Taicang and people who live in Taicang to be in touch through images and allows for a connection to be crafted between people that is valuable now but also significant in light of the cultural heritage of Taicang as seaport.

In all these examples we found elements that fitted well with the concept of 'Interactive Patina of Culture': (1) the repeated engagement with the fountain and the cultural connotation in the first installation, (2) the cultural connotation and the relation between actions and environment in the second, and the historical reframing and the aspects of connecting people in a way that is meaningful on multiple levels for the third.

From a more critical perspective we acknowledge that none of the examples that we present in this short paper extents the concept of 'interactive patina of culture' substantially beyond simple metaphor. The case studies take an existing cultural element and make it 'interactive'. The richness that is implied in the concept of IPC in terms of historical perspectives on culture and meaning created through repeated interaction has not yet panned out. Also, the concepts are still rather generic rather than specific to the Chinese culture.

We see the value not in the results of the workshop but primarily in the process towards the results. The participants learned to value each other's perspectives and skills in the process of designing. What is more, the workshop taught us how the concept of IPC can be deepened; it set us up to create a better workshop in the fall semester.

Conclusion

Looking back at the starting point of the workshop and the results that it yielded we feel that we can further elaborate the concept of 'Interactive Patina of Culture'. The execution of the workshop taught us very valuable lessons both on our own motives, the group process and the concept of IPC itself. In retrospect we recognize in the challenge a mechanism to cooperate between cultures. In line with Trotto we see the value of 'making' together [2], of designing together as a mechanism to generate respect and thus create a fertile ground for further cooperation. However, we also identify that we build our workshop on the implicit recognition of the unique identity of different cultures: the Chinese culture knows different artifacts and customs than the Dutch culture does. Although these differences have always been meaningful to us the present consumption, society and also design seems not to recognize these values anymore. True cultural fit with its side-effect diversity stands in the way of efficient progression and monetization it seems. Our next step is to take the concept of IPC into the direction of culturally inspired design for diversity and we take further inspiration from the traditional artifacts that are strongly embedded in culture. Here we take cues from Sennett's concept of craftsmanship [3] and see the IPC as a value-based approach for cultural design that takes the cultural rooting of maker, the process of making and the designed artifact as the major driver of the design process. Culture is not the goal, but the starting point of design.

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