

Hello!  
My name is Tabea Glöhs  
and these are my MA  
explorations so far...  
Enjoy!



I'm using my MA studies to re-define and reflect on my role as a designer. This is happening in three levels:

1. Gaining knowledge about emerging design practices at Oslo Academy of the Arts, with a focus on

Social Responsive Design  
Meta-Design

2. Applying, using and transforming knowledge through practical experiences in Laos, focussing on

Micro-Utopia  
Co-Design

3. Bringing the discourse about emerging design practice on a ground level by facilitating dialogue and action between students from different educational institutions

**1. WHY I CAME TO OSLO**

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# 1. WHY I CAME TO OSLO

*„Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.“*

Herbert Simon



This is me, before entering the MA at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts in August 2011. I worked as a Junior Art Director in a medium sized advertising company in Germany, where I learnt a lot – especially about how I DON'T want to work as a designer. Victor Papanek was right when he said that advertising is about *„persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care“* (Papanek, 1971). I didn't see any sense in what I was producing and decided to quit in order to find out how I DO want and CAN work as a designer.

Historically, the profession of the designer is linked to the rise of industrialization but industrialization with its mass-production and consumption has caused severe global problems, environmentally (spoiling limited resources, pollution, devastation...) as well as socially (alienation, blind consumption, loss of values...). This has led to a situation where we have to rethink the way we live, work and produce in order to avoid a catastrophe– and designers should move from serving business to serving society.

Through investigating on how designers can actively contribute to a better world where (beyond others) consumption is sustainable and people move from being passive consumers to active participants, I aim to broaden my own design practice throughout the MA and find a way of combining my personal values and visions with my work.

## **2. I AM NOT ALONE: EMERGING DESIGN PRACTICES**



During the first half year at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, I became quite happy and excited: I'm not alone and my questions are part of a larger discourse in design. Since years, designers have questioned their own practice and suggested alternatives – as Victor Papanek who proposed that designers devote 10 percent of their time, talents and skills to serve the “real needs” of humans (Papanek, 1971). In the “First Things First” manifesto (Garland, 1964) graphic designers signed this manifesto to protest against the consumer culture, question advertising and proposing to work for the benefit of society.

And while the majority of designers still perceive and employ design in traditional ways, the voices (and research) for a change of design practice with emphasis on increased societal participation have risen dramatically over the last ten years. This gave birth to a number of new design terms such as: user-centered design, eco-design, design for the other 90%, participatory design, universal design, sustainable design, reflective design, co-design, critical design, emotional design, socially-responsible design, socially-responsive design, green design, conceptual design, slow design, inclusive design, radical design, design activism, design for need, environmental design, contextual design, meta design and many more.

### 3. FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE



Our MA has an emphasis on Social Responsive Design: *“Design which takes as its primary drivers social issues, its main consideration social impact, and its main objective social change.”* (Gamman and Thorpe, 2007). During a 3-weeks course, we learnt how to involve stakeholders in the design process through different tools that ranged from quick and dirty interventions to mapping and scenario development.

Even though this course opened a door to a new way of thinking and working as a designer, it was not until I tested it in “real life” during a one-year scholarship in Laos<sup>1</sup> that I got a true understanding and ownership of this new knowledge. The hand-on experiences confirmed that knowledge is an active thing – you need to work with it, use it, reflect on it and transform it to actually own it.

In Laos, I found three core principles that helped me to re-define my design practice: Micro-Utopia, Co-design and Dialogue. In the following text, I will share first thoughts. However, this is an ongoing investigation and will be further explored in the second part of my MA studies as well as during my post-MA life.

- 1 From April 2011 to April 2012, I got a one-year scholarship from the German development organization GIZ to work in Laos – a country in Southeast Asia that is one of the least developed countries in the world. The position was linked to Provincial Tourism Offices in the provinces of Xiengkhouang, Phongsaly and Sayabouly. The main aim was to support the development of sustainable tourism activities that would improve the quality of life of local people.

### 3.1 MICRO-UTOPIA

*„How is it possible to transform the world from scratch and rebuild a society which would be totally different? I think that is totally impossible and what artists are trying to do now is to create micro-utopias, neighborhood utopias, like talking to your neighbor, just what's happening when you shake hands with somebody.“*

(Bourriaud, 2003)



Ban Napia in Laos: Transforming something that kills into something that feeds.

In his book „Design for Micro-Utopias“, John Wood gives a profound insight into the power of envisioning alternative futures and the roles designers can take in this. Micro-Utopias are not only visions for our future but positive changes that are happening in very small environments today. They are utopias because they are not part of the dominant culture yet, but they inspire and work as models for a preferred situation.

Working in Laos, I came across a beautiful Micro-Utopia:

During the Vietnam War, Laos became one of the most heavily bombed countries in the world. More bombs were dropped on Laos than on Germany and Japan together during World War II. Many of these bombs did not explode and still litter the countryside in many provinces as UXO's (unexploded ordnance). Since the war stopped, over 20.000 Laotians got injured or killed due to these „bombies“. I was working with the remote village of Ban Napia in the north-east of Laos. Here, villagers found their own way of dealing with the “bombie” problem. They collect bombs, remove the explosives, melt the bombs and recycle them into spoons. These spoons are sold at markets all around Laos and provide poor families in Ban Napia with additional income.

I think that this is a beautiful Micro-Utopia: it shows how a local community deals with a global problem (as war and weapons) and find their own solution towards this.

Even though I admire people who work for systemic changes (as for a general stop of the production of weapons), I agree with John Wood that the power of design lies in working on Micro-Utopias. Designers want to see results of their work and find solutions to problems here and now. I often felt helpless confronted with our global challenges – through the concept of Micro-Utopia, I can accept that I'm not changing the whole world. Still, I don't have to give up – I can use my creativity and imagination to work on something small, modest and within my reach that works with and inspires (social) change. If more and more people work like this, it will in the end lead to a “silent” revolution...

### 3.1 CO-DESIGN: MOVING FROM DESIGN FOR PEOPLE TO DESIGN WITH PEOPLE

*“Co-Design is predicated on the concept that people who ultimately use a designed artefact are entitled to have a voice in determining how that artefact is designed. Co-design offers an opportunity for multi-stakeholders and actors to collectively define the context and the problem and in doing so improve the chances of a design outcome to be effective.”*

(Fuad-Luke, 2009)



Workshop with staff from the Quality of Life Association

Working on a variety of projects in Laos, I became aware that the projects which are closest to my heart are those, where I work with other people. This led to a growing interest in co-design. I discovered the potential of co-design for ownership and for the empowerment of people and noticed that it requires different skills and opens new roles for designers but I also met some of the limits of co-design.

## **OWNERSHIP**

During my first week in Laos, I met the county director of an american NGO who asked me to assist in designing a logo for a new local Non-Profit organization<sup>1</sup>. He explicitly mentioned “make sure that the local team has complete ownership over the logo!” Thinking back, this remark influenced not only the development of the logo but it went with me for the whole stay in Laos and back to Norway.

I remember how I used to complain about clients who don't understand anything about design and aesthetics (and I know many other designers complain about the same thing). Now I see that this happens as the result of a particular relationship between client and designer as well as certain ideas we have concerning the outcome of this relationship. Usually, the designer is the one who gives shape to a client's brief with as little interference of the client as possible. The common understanding amongst us designers is, that the more the client is involved, the worse will be the outcome. Design becomes another product of consumption – the client buys himself a new identity and can choose between blue, green or red.

1 The „Quality of Life Association“ is based in Xiengkhouang. They help UXO survivors and people with disabilities to improve their quality of life (medical and psychological treatment, trainings, discussion groups...). My work with them included the re-design of their Visitor Center (including the exhibition), Souvenir development and the design of a logo.





In Laos, I realized that, what is more interesting than the final result . . .





... is how we get there!

When I was asked to develop the logo for the lao Non-Profit organization, it was obvious that I needed to involve the whole team in the making of it. True ownership isn't something that just falls into your lap – you make something yours by using it, experiencing it, working with it, shaping it. I invited everyone (from the manager to the accountant and the volunteer) for a workshop where I asked each of them about their vision for the organization and in a next step to visualize these visions. We discussed the outcome within our group – and I caught that they had never asked themselves these questions before. What we did, was not only the design of a logo, but during our discussions and through the design process, the group formed a common vision and understanding for their organization.

The final design of the logo challenged my own aesthetic standards but works perfectly fine in the cultural context which also explains the positive reactions of the lao team “Thank you very much Tabea, for your kindly established great logo.” When I replied that it was actually their own work (and that i was only the one who put it together in the computer), their smiles grew even wider.

## **EMPOWERMENT**

Besides this, I noticed that co-design can empower people: being an active part at different stages of the design process can give important insights, skills and knowledge to the involved stakeholders. Co-design gives a voice to the people and through listening and responding to it, people can experience that their opinions and actions have an impact on the result. Moreover, it empowers the designer (or at least it did empower me :-)) – by getting different perspectives and knowledge through the exchange with (mostly) non-designers and letting parameters as fun, socializing, openness, and the feeling of doing something useful taking over the mere aesthetics.

## **NEW ROLES FOR DESIGNERS**

The inclusion of my “clients” in the design process asked for an unfamiliar way of working – I became a manager, facilitator, social worker and teacher. All of a sudden, you have to write



Logo Design Process:  
from writing our visions  
to first visualizations and  
discussions to the final  
logo

E-Mails, arrange meetings and workshops, set up spaces, get the materials needed, moderate, motivate, teach, listen carefully, engage and make sure that everyone's voice is heard. You have to develop an understanding for when it is necessary to involve the client/users and when not. You need to stay flexible in order to respond to the group. And most importantly: you have to come up with ideas for activities that are open enough to allow emergence but sufficiently focused to lead towards a result.

Other designers who work with co-design face similar challenges. Metadesign *"encompasses a collaborative process, 'a shared design endeavour aimed at sustaining emergence, evolution and adaptation' (...)* Those who facilitate metadesign teams invite participants to integrate their individual identity through several stages of development to be able to 'think-for', 'think with' and to 'think-as' the team." (Jones & Lundebye, 2012) During our "Social Responsive Design" weeks, the Metadesigners shared some of their tools with us. These tools are used as a framework for designing holistically with people and proved to be very useful for me. Though I did not use them directly, I transformed them into my own instruments and developed new ones which were more advantageous in specific situations in Laos.

I noticed that my background as a designer made the facilitation and moderation much easier – not only because of design thinking but also because of my visual skills.

## **LIMITS OF CO-DESIGN**

I described some of the positive effects of co-design. Co-design proved to be especially useful while working in a development country where the transfer of knowledge and the involvement and ownership of local people plays a crucial role in the success of a project.

However, co-design is not a standard recipe. Not every client or community can spare time or has the interest to be involved in the design process. The results of co-design are often not as aesthetic as the ones from usual design practice and are thus less attractive in a society that is still focused on the outer shell. But this is a question of execution and communication and can be solved.

Another challenge is the changing relationship between me and my clients or users. From my experiences in Laos, including people in the design process means to create a more personal relationship with them. But once the job is done, I'm leaving. What happens afterwards? How do the communities/clients/users feel? Is there a good way to follow-up and keep in touch?

Furthermore, business (and with it some other designers) have discovered the potential of co-design and uses it for their own advantage: involving the future consumers and applying their knowledge to sell more! Even though this comes under the cover of co-design, I think it has nothing to do with it and can be rather seen as taking advantage of others than anything else.

### 3.3 NEXT STEPS: FACILITATION AND DIALOGICAL ACTION?

*"But if I go out into nature, into the unknown, to the fringes of knowledge, everything seems mixed up and contradictory, illogical and incoherent. This is what research does; it smoothes out contradiction, makes things simple, logical, and coherent."*

(Hall, 1976)



Dialogue in the bathtub during a CIRRUS workshop in Iceland with students from all over the Nordic Baltic Countries (June 2012)

After my experiences in Laos, I'm interested in further exploring my role as a facilitator of co-design. I want to concentrate on my background in Visual Communication and investigate on how I can use these skills in a new context (facilitation).

I will work on a case-study that aims to bring the discourse about design on a ground-level: I will engage design students in a vital and critical face-to-face dialogue about their situations (as design students and future design practitioners).

I'm a little bit annoyed that the debate and research about emerging design is only held between professional designers (which some students follow via books, papers, blogs and through visiting lecturers; often without understanding anything since academic writing is super incomprehensible and the field new and uncomparable). I sometimes get the impression that we students tend „*to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new*“ (Illich, 1971). This has to change. Students have to be aware of their power and should engage in critical thinking and action around their own education.

### **So what am I'm going to do?**

I will work with students from KHIO, AHO and Westerdals. These schools are chosen due to their differing educational focus: the industrial, the commercial and the artistic. The schools are also chosen because of their lack of communication and collaboration. I think that many students are interested to overcome these *“Through dialogical conversation, people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another.”* (Sennet, 2012)

### **1. Visual Investigation**

A visual investigation (photography and information graphics) will be used as a starting point to document the current situation of students and gather questions, insights and other material which will be used by myself to create activities for the following encounter between participating students.

## **2. Encounter / Dialogical Action**

An encounter between students where we will have dialogical action. This means that we will not just talk but also take action together (or building the foundation for action)

## **3. Student Power**

This might be a conference, a student-led think tank, a support-structure, a dream, an international network for design students, an experimental laboratory, a squatted house, ...

## **Constraints / Open Questions**

- Get students interested and excited to be involved and take initiative is a challenge > how will I involve them? how can i use visuals to make them interested (and I'm not only talking about a poster)?
- Time: students are involved in many different activities (at school and out of school); can they make spare time to join this?
- After-Life: I want to do something which is not just for now... but what and how and who will continue?
- What to do with my year in Laos? Is it just research or can it be part of my final work?

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