



DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021  
JUNE 08.09.10.11, SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

# Surviving in the wild: Sustaining design and social innovation initiatives in Asia-Pacific

Cyril Tjahja

Research Centre for Built Environment NoorderRuimte  
Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Groningen, The Netherlands  
c.tjahja@pl.hanze.nl

**Abstract** | In recent years, the importance of sustaining social innovation initiatives, once initiated, has gained increasing attention and, in particular, the role that design(ers) can play in this process. However, both the academic study and the practice of design and social innovation are currently lacking sufficient insight into how initiatives are sustained outside of experimental or academic settings and rarely move beyond the involvement of designers and/or researchers. The paper shares experiences from practitioners from Asia-Pacific that are operating in the real world, highlighting their precarious working conditions. The significance of building and maintaining healthy social relations is essential in this context, as these enable the weaving of a strong social fabric around the initiatives that will provide necessarily shelter and to endure long after the practitioners' involvement. Therefore, facilitating the creation of meaningful social relations should be the key objective for design, instead of designing artefacts.

**KEYWORDS | DESIGN AND SOCIAL INNOVATION, SOCIAL RELATIONS, HONG KONG, THAILAND, MALAYSIA**

## 1. Introduction

Design practitioners, together with other professionals who are operating in the social innovation space, often find themselves in an inherent paradox; their aim is to create long-term social change, whereas their involvement is often short-term, project-based and/or contingent on available funding. The notion that designers can (and should) contribute to the survival of initiatives that they are involved in, has been acknowledged relatively early in academic discourse (Burns et al., 2006; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Iversen & Dindler, 2014). Ideally, however, it should be the community who ultimately bears the responsibility for sustaining design and social initiatives (Janzer & Weinstein, 2014; Wang et al., 2016; Cairns, 2017). Several promising directions, described further on in this paper, have been suggested to achieve this desired end-state. However, most studies on sustaining design and social innovation describe initiatives which trace their origins to institutional frameworks, often academia or government, and are situated in relatively stable environments. Furthermore, accounts that proceed beyond the involvement of researchers are rare; a notable exception is a study by Hillgren et al. (2016), which follows the Malmö Living Lab over a seven-year time period. Little is known about initiatives that originate and operate 'in the wild', often with limited or no resources at all, as accounts from practitioners are mostly descriptive in nature and do not shed light on how they manage to sustain themselves. In a way, this is not surprising, as design and social innovation is a relatively young discipline, which is still developing (Irwin, 2015).

## 2. Background of the study

Academic discourse is currently dominated by studies that examine design and social innovation in a European or North American context (Meroni, 2007; Morelli, 2007; Jégou & Manzini, 2008; Murray et al., 2010; DiSalvo et al., 2011; Ilstedt Hjelm & Mårtens, 2011; Westley et al., 2012; Meroni et al., 2013; Di Prete & Mazzarello, 2017; Olivastri, 2017), with the rest of the world considerably less represented. Although a western orientation in design and social innovation research does not necessarily have to be an issue, the assumption that concepts originating from the west can be simply modified and implemented in other, non-western contexts, is problematic (Bala-Miller et al., 2008; Manzini, 2015), as transferring successful ideas and methods from the west into an entirely different context might not be appropriate nor desirable (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). There is a danger of imported solutions and paradigms replacing local knowledge and practices, which might be better suited to tackle issues in their original context and, in addition, can also be used as examples that the west could learn from (Bala-Miller et al., 2008; Akama et al., 2019).

The dominance of the western perspective in academic discourse on design and social innovation can be regarded as part of the broader discussion concerning the decolonisation of knowledge (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Mignolo, 2007). In particular, the *decolonising design* approach, which respects the relation of ideas, projects and ideas to their particular

contexts and prefers to design relations that recognise differences instead of singular perspectives and “common denominators” (Schultz et al., 2018). Moreover, the centre of design culture, traditionally perceived to be based in the west, should be disconnected from the colonial narrative of modernity and reconnected to *pluriversal* narratives, which assume that multiple centres of design can exist simultaneously (Onafuwa, 2018).

This paper therefore aims to contribute to a more pluriversal body of knowledge on design and social innovation by sharing insights from Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. The study is part of a larger PhD research project which aims to determine what constitutes design and social innovation initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, investigating why projects are initiated, for whom value is created and what role design plays in the process.

### 3. Perspectives on sustaining design and social innovation

Academic discourse suggests a variety of approaches on how to sustain design and social innovation initiatives. Three major streams, that at times overlap, can be distinguished herein: the first aims to create favourable environments and/or (social) infrastructures to support both current and future initiatives, the second focuses on upscaling and replicating the initiatives themselves and the third aims to preserve the initiatives’ underlying ideas and concepts.

#### Sustaining through creating favourable environments

*Enabling (eco)systems*, consisting of cultural and social structures, are described by Manzini (2013, 2015) as a requirement for design and social innovation initiatives to be able to flourish and spread. Within these ecosystems, designers can contribute through their skills of visualisation, storytelling and scenario building, and build capacity within the community by for example, making use of toolkits.

*Infrastructuring*, suggested by Bjögvínsson et al. (2012), is another approach aimed at reinforcing long-term commitment. It entails a process of continuously building and expanding a network of stakeholders, while being flexible regarding the allocation of time and resources. Rooted in Scandinavian participatory design, projects in this approach are perceived as *Things*, socio-material assemblies in which both designers and other actors participate. Designers therefore need to consider that after their initial involvement, design Things might continue with other actors and stakeholders. In this context, the term ‘infrastructuring’ refers to the act of creating an infrastructure that consists of relations that are connected through different times and places.

The enabling systems and infrastructuring approaches have in recent times grown closer, as studies have been examining how design Things can shape the building of future social relations (Light & Akama, 2014) and strengthen social resilience by facilitating collaborative encounters between community members (Cipolla, 2018; Manzini & Thorpe, 2018)

## Sustaining through upscaling and replicating initiatives

The advantage of scaling-up initiatives, according to Jégou and Manzini (2008), is that it enables a large number of people to live sustainably. The scaling-up of design and social innovation initiatives does not entail an increase in size, but utilises creativity, design, entrepreneurship and technological knowledge to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of initiatives, which in turn facilitates implementation on a larger scale. Similarly, when replicating initiatives, it is not the creative communities themselves, which are highly localised, that are to be replicated. The emphasis should instead be on replicating the service ideas that are deemed suitable for adaptation to new contexts. Furthermore, initiatives should be scaled up and replicated by increasing their numbers (not their size) by connecting them to a larger network. The importance of scale is also underlined by Mulgan (2017), who asserts that it plays a role in linking initiatives to broader programmes. Smart adaptation should be given priority over innovation when upscaling, without neglecting the skills needed to adapt social innovations to new contexts.

## Sustaining through preservation of concepts, ideas and examples

Upscaling and replicating of initiatives, as described in the previous section, are one way to preserve the concepts and ideas that underpin design and social innovation initiatives. In addition, (design and) social innovation networks, such as DESIS, DESIAP, SIX, Impact Hub and Ashoka can safeguard the knowledge and contacts of the field itself. An accessible and convenient way to both retain and replicate design and social innovation ideas, particularly its methods, are the toolkits, guides and courses offered by various organisations and academics. Examples are IDEO's *Field Guide to Human-Centered Design* (IDEO.org, 2015), frogdesign's *Collective Action Toolkit* (2012) and the *Social Design Methods Menu* by Kimbell and Julier (2012).

The building of strong social relations requires considerable effort, but yields many benefits for the design and social innovation process. As suggested by, for example, (Light & Akama, 2014) in this study, too, social relations were found to strengthen initiatives by providing a foundation from which new ideas can emerge, even when the design component fails or ceases to exist. They can also help create a sense of ownership among the community.

The three main categories of approaches are, however, currently still too theoretical and speculative in nature. A large majority of the cases discussed are limited in scope and/or consist of pilot projects, that tentatively project future scenarios. Toolkits and courses spread knowledge through their dissemination tools and methods, but often do not provide enough insight into contextual factors, which are also not immediately apparent to prospective users. Moreover, examples of real-life initiatives continuing for a long period of time using any of the suggested methods are virtually non-existent.

## 4. Methodology

The PhD research study, from which this study derives its results, comprised seven months during which Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur were visited. The researcher spent roughly two months in each city, contacting initiatives, building relationships with those involved and conducting interviews. Case studies, defined by Yin (2018) as an in-depth empirical investigation of a phenomenon within its real world context, were considered as a suitable method to examine how the initiatives operate in their own respective environments. A multiple-case study design was used for this purpose, which entailed the selection of multiple cases in multiple countries, each of which was studied in their own context. Eventually, sixteen initiatives were selected as case studies, five in Hong Kong, six in Thailand and five in Malaysia (see figure 1 for an overview).

HONG KONG		
Initiative	Initiated by	Usage of design
Goodseed	Government	Capacity building, design thinking, co-creation
DOMAT	Architectural agency, social enterprise	Architecture, product design
Fine Dying (SI.DLab)	Non-profit social design agency	Design thinking, co-creation, empathy, immersion, prototyping, capacity building
Form Society	Independent	Event organising
Play Depot	Independent	Design activities are organised by stakeholders
BANGKOK		
Initiative	Initiated by	Usage of design
Co-create haroenkrung (TCDC)	Government	Urban renewal, prototyping, visualisation, event organising
Deschooling Games	Independent	Game design, event organising, co-creation
Pom Mahakan	Independent	Design thinking, prototyping, co-creation, community architecture, participatory mapping
Bangkok Chinatown	Architectural agency	Design thinking, prototyping, co-creation

CROSSs	Architectural agency	Participatory design, architecture, prototyping, designing relations
The Rambutan	Independent	Graphic design, activism
<b>KUALA LUMPUR</b>		
<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Initiated by</b>	<b>Usage of design</b>
Earth Heir	Social enterprise	Product design
3nity Design	Design & branding agency	Branding, graphic design, product design
Green Pocket Park (POW Ideas)	Architectural agency	Architecture, art
Lorong Bandar 13 (Think City)	Government	Urbal renewal, architecture, co-creation, visioning
Water Warriors & Mukim Pasangan (University of Malaya)	Academia	Designing relations

**Figure 1.** Overview of the sixteen initiatives that participated in the study.<sup>1</sup>

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, which were recorded using an audio recording device. The questions asked during the interview were structured around the *Activity Theory* framework<sup>2</sup>, which studies both individuals and their contexts simultaneously by studying the activity that is generated in the process (Engeström, 1999). In addition, other relevant topics or themes identified during the conversation were highlighted in handwritten notes.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data. A method that is widely used in qualitative research, it can identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data in this study was approached in an inductive manner, which entails the presumption that the findings are the result of the analyst’s interaction with the data, leading to the identification and construction of patterns, themes and categories (Patton, 2015). Reoccurring topics in the interviews were grouped into broader themes and further grouped into three key themes (see figure 2). The findings discussed in this paper focus on the third key theme: sustaining design and social innovation.

<sup>1</sup> A detailed description of the case studies can be found in Tjahja (2019)

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of how Activity Theory was used in the larger PhD research study, please see Tjahja, Yee & Aftab (2017) and Tjahja (2019)

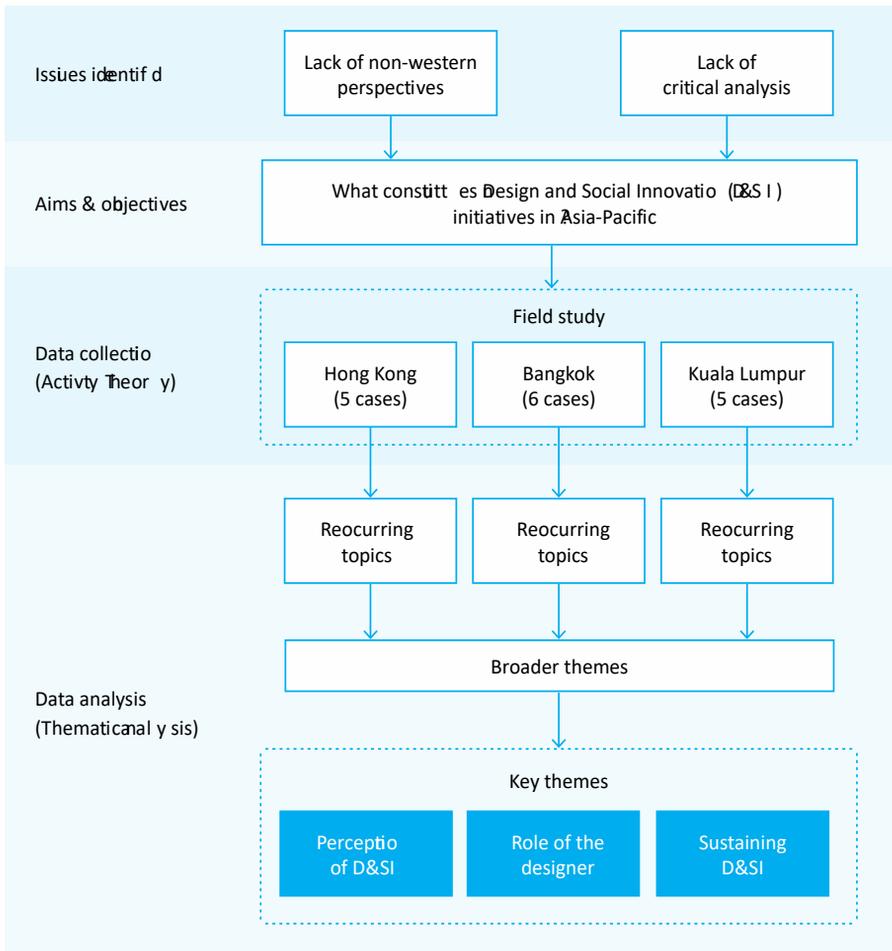


Figure 2. A methodological map of the PhD research study.

## 5. Findings

The insights gained from the practitioners who participated in the study regarding the continuation of their initiatives can be categorised in four themes: the importance of building and maintaining social relations, issues surrounding the upscaling and replicating of their initiatives, difficulties finding a suitable business model and the lack of public space.

## The importance of building and maintaining social relations

Social relations can influence the design and social innovation process in various ways and can have dimensions and modalities that are not always immediately apparent. Practitioners in all three cities reported that the building of (new) social relations was beneficial for their initiatives both during and after the process. Maintaining good social relations with community members and other stakeholders was essential for building both trust and capacity within the community as well as creating a sense of ownership of the initiative, with some respondents noting that the social aspect of their work ultimately was more important than the design aspect. Furthermore, several initiatives managed to create new social ties among the local community, which stakeholders perceived to be a valuable outcome.

In Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, social relationships are often characterised by a high degree of informality, which helps to expand networks and create new opportunities in the process. Particularly in Bangkok, both the positive and negative effects of social hierarchy were significant, interacting with practitioner's work on multiple levels and in different scenarios (Author et al., 2017). For example, having access to key figures that are situated high in the hierarchical ladder can be of significant benefit in terms of an initiative's progression or provide opportunities, which would have not materialised otherwise.

## Issues with upscaling and replicating

Academic discourse perceives the scaling-up and replication of initiatives as an effective way to spread either the initiatives themselves or the ideas that underpin them. None of the bottom-up initiatives in this study, however, have managed to do this successfully. Several of the respondents reported the lack of manpower as a major issue, either within their own initiative or the stakeholders involved. Furthermore, most of the initiatives are just one of many projects that the practitioners work on. Combined with the insecurity of not knowing to what extent they can secure funding for their social activities, making strategic decisions whether to prioritise social or commercial projects or whether to expand their team can be challenging. These precarious conditions in which initiatives oftentimes are forced to operate, make upscaling and replicating a goal that is difficult to attain for most. Even if initiatives do manage to upscale and replicate, the eventual outcome might not be desirable. An example is the case of the Water Warriors initiative, which was scaled-up by its host university. However, the process of institutionalisation introduced concepts such as accountability and bureaucracy, while not sufficiently taking into the social network that the initiative created between the various stakeholders involved. This threatened the initiative's original bottom-up character, leading to a loss of motivation for the practitioners working on the project.

## Difficulties finding a suitable business model

Arguably, the most important question that could be asked in the context of sustaining design and social innovation is “who is going to pay for it?”. It is therefore striking that this question often remains unanswered. In Hong Kong, for example, both housing and living costs are among the highest in the world. Practitioners therefore often do not have the luxury to carefully plan out their activities, but need to hit the ground running, particularly when it comes to financing their initiatives. Most of the non-government initiatives studied are not subsidised and have to find other ways to support themselves. In the best-case scenario, income from commercial activities is transferred to fund social activities. In some cases, however, such as Form Society and The Rambutan, the practitioners fund their initiatives using their own private savings. Ultimately, none of these scenarios are sustainable in the long run. Moreover, even when an initiative is fortunate enough to receive funding, it cannot be relied on as a stable source of income.

A related issue is the lack of a suitable legal entity for the initiative. In Thailand, for example, it is currently not possible to mix business and social activities within one organisation, which leaves practitioners unable to make use of tax exemptions and provides no ground for the initiative to exist at all. Academics and practitioners therefore have to take into account that legal frameworks can vastly differ per country or territory, potentially limiting an initiative’s present and/or future opportunities. For example, the general environment in Hong Kong and Malaysia appears to be more favourable towards social innovation compared to Thailand, making the threshold to engage in design and social innovation significantly lower in the first two countries. This does, however, not necessarily mean that it is practiced less in Thailand.

## The lack of public space

In several of the initiatives, such as Co-create Charoenkrung (Bangkok), Play Depot (Hong Kong) and Lorong Bandar 13 (Kuala Lumpur), design interventions were performed that had an impact on public areas. However, in all three cities the availability of public space was an issue. Public space, particularly in Europe, is often assumed to be owned by the (local) government. However, in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, most of the spaces that appear to be public, such as parks and riverfronts, are owned by private parties who have no particular interest in participating in social innovation. Since government influence over these companies is limited, their lack of cooperation can disrupt any kind of intervention that affects public areas. In Hong Kong, physical space itself is extremely scarce and one of the city’s most urgent issues. The availability of public space is generally not considered to be as a condition for social innovation from the dominant western perspective. This is exemplified by a study conducted by Thammasat University for the Co-create Charoenkrung project, which found that public space as an indicator was, in fact, missing from western models and therefore had to be added to their own co-creation model for creative districts.

## 6. Discussion

For many initiatives, particularly those stemming from an academic or institutional context, upscaling and /or replicating are often considered the ultimate indicators of success. However, this might not necessarily be true for initiatives that originate from outside of these frameworks, whose growth is inhibited by the harsh and unforgiving conditions in which they need to operate; they are simply surviving. Even for initiatives which do have a background in academia, such as Water Warriors, the clash between its grassroots philosophy and the university's institutional framework proved to be a serious challenge to its existence, as scaling up the initiative failed to include the social network which was present in its original incarnation. Therefore, it should be reconsidered whether upscaling and replication should be a default progression path for an initiative to take. In some cases, it might be preferable for initiatives to remain small, local, but true to its original intentions and principles.

Private organisations currently have little incentive to engage in social innovation, which can be problematic for initiatives that propose any kind of spatial transformation. More effort needs to be undertaken to better understand how to motivate these organisations to participate in, or at least facilitate, social innovation efforts. However, practitioners also need to accept that some organisations will never be persuaded to participate, which can have significant implications for the scope and scale of proposed interventions. For initiatives it is therefore essential to communicate appropriately with their stakeholders, managing their perceptions and expectations, and setting goals that are realistic in order to avoid disappointment or even disengagement.

A common factor which binds most of the bottom-up initiatives in this study is the precarious state in which they find themselves. In addition to helping local communities, they also need to sustain themselves, which is a constant struggle. Embracing this notion of precariousness by incorporating it in their practice might be one way for practitioners to deal with this. Designers would have to accept the fact that they themselves will most likely not be making a change nor bear witness to it. Their main task then would be to build capacity and transfer ownership to the community within a limited timeframe, which would not be far from the project-based way of working that designers already practice. However, whether such short-term interactions with the community would have sufficient meaning or value is debatable.

If designers should indeed shift their focus to the creation of favourable environments for communities to co-design with one another, a more effective solution might therefore be to create enabling ecosystems for the initiatives themselves as well. By aligning their own goals with those of other stakeholders or actors, practitioners might be able to construct an environment where they are supported by those who have an interest in the success of the initiative.

Social relations are forces that can be considered as fundamental to design and social innovation and whose significance we have only recently begun to understand. Their influence can be felt in a variety of ways, particularly when trying to sustain initiatives. For example, upscaling and replicating can fail if the social components are not taken into account. Maintaining healthy social relations with the community, governments and private organisations can help initiatives survive in inhospitable environments. But perhaps most importantly, the social fabric that has been carefully built up for the community by the practitioners has the potential to outlast the initiative itself. The creation of the social relations that constitute it should therefore take priority over any design activity as any designed product, service or intervention would have no meaning or value if the social dimension is absent.

## 7. Conclusion

The experiences shared by practitioners from Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur contribute to a more thorough understanding of how design and social innovation initiatives that grow up 'in the wild' manage to sustain themselves. The constant precariousness state of the initiatives, and in some cases the practitioners themselves, is perhaps what stands out most. Initiatives that are rooted in academia or government could be perceived as ships who have a home port, a safe harbour where they are based and from which they can sail into the open sea. In contrast, initiatives that are 'out there', are ships constantly battling a rough sea, which might not necessarily be hostile, but merely indifferent to their existence.

For design to make a truly meaningful contribution to social innovation, its primary objective should be to enable initiatives to move beyond their exploration and experimental stages towards long-term independent survival. The construction and maintenance of social relations, awareness on the many complex ways how they exert influence the design process and how they can be grown and managed in a more effective way is crucial for the well-being and survival of the initiative in the long run.

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**About the Author:**

**Cyril Tjahja** is a postdoctoral researcher at the NoorderRuimte Research Centre, Hanze University of Applied Sciences. His research interests include design and social innovation, co-creation and co-design, visual communication, Dutch design and material culture.

**Acknowledgements:** Part of the PhD research field study was supported by the Design Research Society.