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DB218 Design for Social Interaction in Public Spaces

What did I expect of this module?

I chose this module as both a followup of my previous module and my Final Bachelor Project. In the previous one, I worked together with students from different cultural backgrounds, on the subject of food; an excellent common ground to discuss design decisions and different cultural perspectives. I hoped to apply this knowledge in this module, where the small insights I already gained from the mindset of Chinese students would make it easier for me to connect with my team members. I am curious to see what their approach to design is and what we can learn from each other as designers. For my final bachelor project, I designed the outside of theaters in a public space, that displays information from the digital world on the physical theater to promote user interaction. This module seems to have a similar starting point, promoting this interaction in a spatial setting, and I hope to further develop the technological and sociocultural skills I learned in my FBP project.

What's your drama?

One of the biggest points to reflect upon is the mutual goal our group had after forcing ourselves to strengthen the drama behind our installation. First off, I find the concept of building the installations in layers around a drama as a starting point, fascinating. The drama seems to be an insurance of sorts; that the final product will contain an experience or meaning that will truly ring with the user once they take part in the installation. If the drama is not there, then the experience will stay superficial and might not connect on a deeper level. I have set a goal for myself this semester that I want my designs to connect on this deeper level, so I felt like it was a challenge for me this module to find this strong drama. Our group settled on a drama that was okay at first. Something about spending time with someone to strengthen a connection. But I sensed no passion in the group for this, no emotional response, nothing. I asked everyone to further explore this drama to really find something that we

truly connected to. We all wrote down one positive and one negative experience on the subject of connections, and it was then we came across the powerful relation between Chinese parents and their children, and how the communication can be out of balance. I have felt the same at times with my own parents, and we felt a mutual understanding with each other on this subject. It was emotional, but it did mean that we struck a powerful chord. It was like finding the fuel for our work and it gave us a lot of energy to build our installation around. It was something we could fall back on when we were unsure of where to go. I feel like I can use this approach in my future designs. It means you have to travel to a vulnerable place emotionally, but I think it can make a product more stronger, and more rooted in who I am as a designer.

Working together with Chinese students

I was very excited about working together with the Chinese students, this was one of my main reasons for selecting this module. They seem to have a more deliberate slow pace towards a final design, whereas we are expected to come up with small results in a rapid succession. I was impressed by the work they had in their own portfolio. Showing and sharing our previous work before we started on our project for this workshop proved to be vital; we knew exactly what each others strengths and weaknesses were, making it easier to divide tasks. Because of the language barrier, it is easy to oversee these strengths. They sometimes get lost in the smaller English vocabulary some of the Chinese students possess. I can imagine they must feel caged inside their own ability of expressing themselves in English. We found it easier as a group to draw out our ideas, and one of the Chinese students sometimes acted almost as an interpreter because of her great level of speaking English; we found our own balance of communication that worked for each of us in the end. Maybe because we are all design students of some sort, the language barrier is often not as big as we perceive it as first, and we are able to find our own creative solutions of expressing ideas in a team. I think this experience will prove its worth in the future, where I want to do more projects involving experts and fellow designers from different cultural and lingual backgrounds.

Lights, sound, action!

One of the best feelings during the module, was when the electronics setup we had in mind was actually working. I often find myself to be quite insecure about my skills in electronics, maybe because of a lack of experience, but I always had interest in making circuits and electronics work. In a place this far from home, and completely differently equipped than our university, we still managed to find all the materials and components to get an interactive



installation going. By a simple combination of Processing, audio editing software, and Arduino, we could get a fairly simple installation to work, with big effects. It was this realisation of how quickly you can create an effective and big interaction by combining simple parts that opened my eyes to possible future installations. The fact that in a few days time, a working full scale installation can be made is incredible and I feel like this lowers the threshold for me to use such technology in my own future designs.

Making a connection

Of course this module was not only about the actual workshop we did. Being placed in a completely different environment brings in a lot of other stuff as well. Notably, we first went to Shanghai before we headed for Taicang to work on the workshop. Shanghai is strange in that it is so segregated when it comes to its Chinese inhabitants and the Western people and expats that live there. I noticed a big barrier in connecting, maybe because of prejudices both ways. To go into detail here would take too much text, but it wasn't until I made friends with a Chinese girl who could openly talk in English with me about anything, that I felt I could get a glimpse behind the touristic image of Shanghai we were getting in the days before I met her. She showed me her favorite spots and there she opened up about tons of design ideas she had herself and how she saw the Chinese culture. The hard working Chinese generations who grew up outside of the rapid development that is taking place in China now, maybe aren't used to all the supposed freedom they

now have. With more wealth and time for personal development, the Chinese sometimes simply don't know what to do for fun. In a strange contrast, social interaction is hindered by the demolishing of traditional Chinese homes that are build around squares. The current high skyscrapers don't allow for much playtime with neighbouring friends outside of school. It is strange and inspiring to see the effect of such rapid development as an outsider. I did not really think about this at first, but now I can see a lot of opportunities for designers to help overcome the problems the Chinese might face in their own social development.

The fellow students in the workshop were all so open and accepting of us. Once I opened up to them, they showed me a lot of their daily life and different social dynamics. It must be strange for them to go from a family with no brothers and sisters, to shared dorms in huge universities. Maybe their friends feel like the siblings they never had to them. It's things like these you take for granted in your own life, but you do not start to think about until you fully emerge yourself in a situation where everything is so different.

I felt really blessed that I could be part of this workshop. It was more than just a module. It opened my eyes to what is possible, both in my design process and in my ambitions to do international projects. To make such strong connections and good friends in such a small time, is definately an experience to cherish for the rest of my life.

