Culturally Localised Product Design : Unchanged Values

Ahmad Rizal Abdul Rahman & Mohd Shahrizal Dolah

(Student: Mohd Faizal Ya)

Introduction

Research reveals that non-physical merits of product-user experiences including aesthetics, emotion, pleasurability, product 'soul' and cultural factors tend to be overlooked or sometimes ignored in the pursuit of factors such as physical styling, functionality, usability and ergonomics. Manufacturers tend to make the least changes possible to make an existing product match with specific cultural characteristics and focus on making the highest profit as possible.

Users culturally specific needs may be particularly unpredictable in a changing society. Standardization of product and some 'global' thinking may neglect the diversity between people in different communities (Kim et al 2006). According to Leinbach (2002), design should no longer be seen as a styling shape or just an art object but products should be designed and produced with appropriate features which reflect cultural aspects and can be sustained for a longer period of acceptance for certain communities. It is suggested that designer's understanding about specific user characteristics and their culture could ensure the success of a product and a longer use.

Methods

Based on our experience as a product designer in Malaysia and through user experience in our own cultural domain, we observed frequently that cultural factors affect product. This perspective has been realized through continuous observational periods and through user experience engagement. This insight has led to our interest in culturally localised products. We considered the possibility that, as an alternative to developing completely new products, traditional artefacts might be improved and made relevant to today's lifestyle, which can be done through a good design practice.

Previous research suggests that a variety of complex factors including economics and demographics have led to big changes in lifestyle in the twentieth century. Schutte and Ciarlante (1998) revealed that rapid economic growth, especially in Asia over the past few years, has led to significant changes in values and social structures. They also claimed that apart from market data, demographic pattern data could be used by manufacturers to distinguish the changes that are difficult to address, such as the needs of the users. In addition to these demographic changes, the local government's socio-economic planning has also contributed to influencing current products and services. Previous studies have revealed that in many Asian developing countries, there has been remarkable change in products and services influenced by social development factors such as economic growth and a change in government policies (eg. Harper 1999, Hassan 2004)

This economic shift has also established the movement of population from traditional rural to industrial urban areas as reported in Malaysia Internal Migration statistic (Department of Statistic Malaysia 2006). In relation to that, Talib (2000) points out

that the growth in economic and social development in Malaysia for more than two decades has also led to a transformation in the social class structure. Furthermore, he stressed that a new social class group of users has emerged, which is more focused on settling in the urban area which is known as 'the new middle class' (Taib 1996). In this respect, Radam et al. (2006) revealed in their work that the household structure has also changed simultaneously within these social class groups due to the increment in their level of development and economic prosperity.

As socio-economic progress and demographic patterns change, culturally localised products should also be improved to be more coherent with user's current practices, social status and new life settings.

Results

Many culturally localised products have been transformed into a different practical form in response to the social and environmental changes in user's lives. In Malaysia, culturally localised products are still in great demand and some can still be found in an unchanged condition, as users still have a strong attachment to them, although they are experiencing a different lifestyle through social migration. Illustrations below show images that indicate some examples of unchanged values when a product takes on a new practical form responding to social and/or geographical migration (Figure 1)
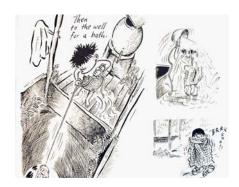

Figure 1: Images of Traditional Practices and Unchanged Values (Malaysia Context : moving from traditional rural to industrial urban areas) Left - Satirical illustrations by Lat (1993), Right photograph from anonymous source.

Based on these early observations, we recognised that products could transform and/or migrate into a different practical form in response to the social changes and environment of the users through numerous, confusing and unpredictable

routes. These can be observed in individual cases but are difficult to measure as a "snapshot" across

communities where individuals are found at all stages of this migration. However, this observation has supported my early research hypothesis.

In most cases observed in our professional practice, especially when users are engaged with products and adapting to new environments, we found that users are experiencing social and cultural changes in adopting a modern urban lifestyle, whilst at the same time still trying to adapt elements of traditional products and practices where appropriate to their new urban settings. Through our initial background research with geographical migrants, we began to recognize that more than just cultural elements influenced product interaction with users. In the hybrid lifestyles of migrants (people moving from rural area into urban areas), there are also other aspects and possibilities of interaction in terms of ergonomics, usability, safety, hygiene, and practicality, which can be potential areas for designers to engage with, as can be seen in (Figure 2) below the use of traditional knife to cook local food such as fried banana has led to the new innovative product design to support the unchanged lifestyle and based on demand on cultural needs.

(Modern banana Peeler (Banana Slice and Slit). Project Leader : Mohd Shahrizal Dolah. Inventor Mohd Faizal Ya; ID Pending)

Figure 2: The needs of having traditional tools to assist cultural practices in current situation

In these early observations we encountered users who retained a strong traditional cultural connection with the tools or products they employed. They have long experiences of living and learning with such products. Most of these urban dwellers have grown up in villages prior to establishing a new life for themselves in the city. However, the new environment engenders adaptation of these traditional products and services. Fernandes (1995), who conducts research into localisation and globalisation of products, states that 'values' are basic assumptions which have been developed over a long period of time and are very slow to change.

Although some of these products might be transformed into new practical forms to deal with new environments or the availability of new materials, the application of these products remains broadly the same. In relation to this, our early observations indicated that product use, choices, adaptations and users' cultural mentalities arise from their cultural experience and predisposes them to particular practices regardless of the external environment, even if that requires adaptation of new materials and products as indicated in Figure 1 & 2 above.

In this situation, we believe that designers are required to offer more than just an improved version or a new product, but rather an appropriate design and social engagement system in which design and designer can both play a role in the social investigation that informs designing.

Rose and Zuhlke. (2001) have suggested that designers should adopt a 'user requirements' approach to cultural understanding, by organising the existing cultural data into two categories such as cultural mentalities and cultural environment which are reflected on one another. She defined cultural mentalities as being cultural facets evident in that cultural group, thought or behaviour, while the cultural environments are elements around those cultural facets that determined the design (Figure 3).

According to Hofstede (1994), cultural mentalities form the deepest layer of culture. These have been built up over generations and reinforced by learning experience throughout their lives. While cultural environments are largely built by their surroundings, including the environment and society around them, family, friends, society and nations.

Cultural Environments

-Political Structure
-Educational System
-Family
-History
-Economic System
-Living Environment

Cultural Mentalities

-Aesthetic
-Preference
-Symbol Understanding
-Express Accuracy
-Linear or Systematic Thinking
-Flow Concept
-Attitude to Authority
-Attitude to Technology
-Preferred Mode of comm

Figure 3: An approach combination of culture variables and meta-models of cultures for product development - Rose et. al (2001).

In conclusion, we propose that such work into product migration in relation to social change could assist designers and future research work, especially in these particular areas, to understand how to respond to fluid cultural circumstances. Designers should engage with the real social situation and should be more sensitive to the changes or improvements needed to bring them in line with user's current practices in their new environment; they should not just simply offer users a simple continuity of similar traditional forms of design which might not be relevant to their culturally-changed circumstances. Designers can no longer take shelter from their own actions and continually reproduce type of consumer goods when research into user-needs is becoming increasingly dominant in the design research arena including when

observing unchanged values and potential transform products design.

References

Department of Statistic Malaysia (2006). Yearly report: Principal statistics on labour force and unemployment. Government Press, Kuala Lumpur.

Harper T.N. (1999). The End of Empire and the making of Malaya, Cambridge University Press.

Hassan R. (ed.) (2004). Local and Global - Social transformation in Southeast Asia: Essays in Honour of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, Brill.

Hofstede G. (1994). Cultures and Organisations : Software of the Mind. Harper Collins Publisher.

Kim C.J., Christiaans H.H.C.M., Diehl J.C. (2006). Exploring the influence of culture in consumer electronic products.16th World Congress on Ergonomics, International Ergonomic Association, Maastricht, Netherlands, 10-14 July

Lat (1993). Kampong Boy., NST Berita Publishing Press.

Leinbach C. (2002). Managing for Breakthroughs: A View from Industrial Design. In: Squires S., Byrne B. (ed.). Creating Breakthrough Ideas: The Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry. Westport, Connecticut and London, Bergin Garvey, 3-16

Radam Alias, Abu Mansor S.,Marikan D. (2006). Demand analysis of (FAFH) Homes' in Malaysia. UPM's Journal of Economics, [online] at : http://econmail.upm.edu.my/staffpaper/sp0062006.pdf

Rose and Zuhlke (2001). Culture oriented design: Developer's knowledge gap in these area. Proceedings Volume from the 8th IFAC Analysis, Design and Evaluation of Human Machine Systems, Kassel, Germany,18-20 Sept

Schutte H., Ciarlante D. (1998). Consumer Behaviour in Asia. London, MacMillan Press Ltd.

Sennet R. (1978). The fall of public man-on the social psychology of capitalism. New York, Vintage Books Randon House Publisher.

Talib R. (2000) Composition of household expenditure by quintile income group malaysia. In: Chua B.H. (ed.). Consumptions in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities. Routledge