

Collaborating with local administrative offices to improve neighborhoods: A case study of the Design Consultant program

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Abstract

In 2016, the Seoul Design Foundation, a city-funded design organization in Seoul, carried out a program that aims to solve local problems in the city by catalyzing collaboration between designers and civil servants. The one-year program, called “Design Consultant” program, supported 15 design projects addressing problems at a sub-district level through the collaboration with sub-district offices in Seoul. This paper examines the underlying strategies of the program to address a city’s problems, and at the same time to promote the adoption of the design in the public sector. Four projects carried out under the framework of the Design Consultant program were studied by interviewing the civil servants and junior designers who collaborated for five months at local sub-district offices.

Keywords: transformation design, local administrative offices, scaling out, scaling up, Seoul metropolitan city.

Introduction

With the growing interest in the potential of design-led innovation in the public sector (e.g., Bason, 2013; Manzini and Staszowski, 2013; European Commission, 2013; Burns *et al.*, 2006), a number of programs and projects that attempt to address social issues by using design – with an emphasis on collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including public bodies and citizens – have emerged over the recent years. The Design Council’s RED team defined this new design discipline as “transformation design” (Burns *et al.*, 2006) that “builds on traditional design skills to address social and economic issues” (Burns *et al.*, 2006, p. 6) and uses the design process “as a means to enable a wide range of disciplines and stakeholders to collaborate” (Burns *et al.*, 2006, p. 6). This paper pays a particular attention on the potential of a city-scale design project to address local problems in the city. Various examples already exist in design fields. Dott07 (Thackara, 2007) in North East England, and City Eco Lab in Saint-Étienne (International Design Biennale Saint-Étienne, 2008) have showed how design can be used to stimulate citizens to envision and co-design more sustainable ways of living in the city they live in; Regional scale projects like “Feeding Milan” in Milan (Cantù and Simeone, 2010) and “Design Harvest” in Shanghai (Lou *et al.*, 2013) used design as a strategic tool to catalyze interdisciplinary collaboration among local stakeholders and promote sustainable development at the regional level; “Territoires en Résidences” program in France (La 27e Region, 2011) applies design methods and thinking to experiment solutions to

complex societal challenges, and to co-design scenarios articulating a future vision. This paper examines a case of the “Design Consultant” program, run by a city-funded design organization in Seoul, to address problems in the city through collaboration between designers and local sub-district offices.

Case description

The “Design Consultant” program: A framework project to foster design-led problem solving on a municipal level

The Seoul Design Foundation, a city-funded design organization in Seoul, launched a program called “Design Consultant” in 2013 to promote design-led innovation in the business sector as well as public sector. The first three editions of the yearly program focused on facilitating local SMEs (Small and medium-sized enterprises) and public organizations to adopt design, by providing them opportunities to collaborate with design consultants. As the participating SMEs and public organizations could get consulting from design experts without costs, the program drew interest from local SMEs and public organizations, and resulted in 249 projects from 2013 to 2015.

The 2016’s program shifted its focus to local problems in the city, and facilitating collaboration between designers and civil servants to tackle the city’s problems. In February 2016, the Seoul Design Foundation published a call for projects to invite local sub-district offices to collaborate with designers to tackle problems in their

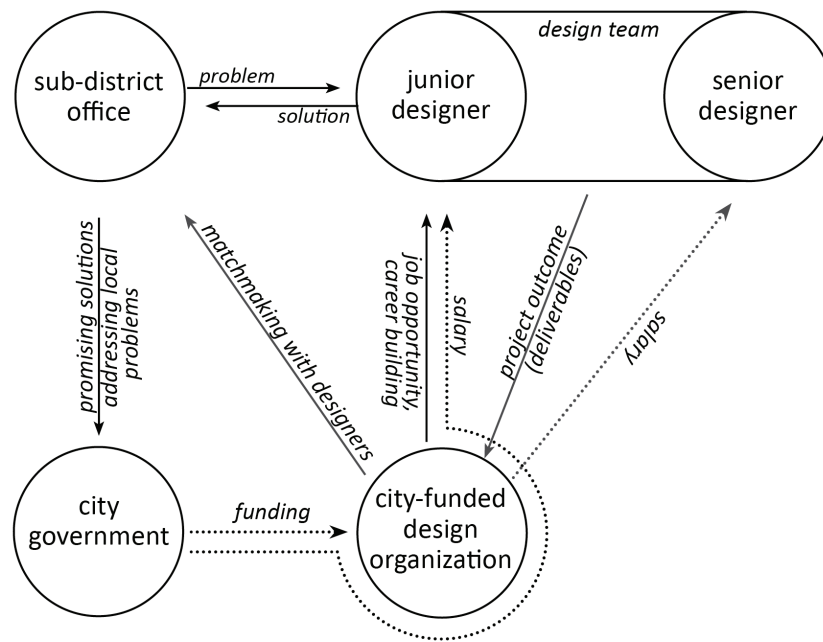


Figure 1. Stakeholders of the 2016's Design Consultant program.

sub-districts. Any sub-district offices in Seoul could apply for the program by submitting a proposal describing specific problems to be addressed (e.g., elderly care, improving community service) and the amount of budget available for implementation of new solutions that will be developed through collaboration with designers. Selected proposals were circulated to design communities to invite designers interested in the proposals to join. Through a matchmaking process, 15 project teams were formed. Each team consists of two designers – one junior designer and one senior designer – and one civil servant from the collaborating sub-district office. The progress of each project was monitored through regular meetings organized by the Seoul Design Foundation, and any conflicts and issues within each project team were also discussed during the meetings. The participating sub-district offices covered project-related costs, but the salaries of the designers were covered by the program, as the senior designers were paid directly by the Seoul Design Foundation, and the junior designers were paid through the city government's "New Deal" program that aims to create more job opportunities in the public sector to reduce unemployment rate in the city.

Each team aimed to develop solutions to address problems in the sub-district. The problems each team focused on are diverse, ranging from lack of parking space to illegal garbage dumping, yet most of them are common problems that other districts of the city also face. The idea behind the Design Consultant program was that promising solutions experimented on a sub-district scale – the smallest unit of public administration in Seoul – may help other sub-districts that have similar problems. The program also aimed to raise awareness of the potential role of design in addressing social problems, so to foster adoption of design in the public sector.

Neighborhood-scale projects under the framework project

Each project team carried out a project autonomously for five months. The junior designer of each team nested in the collaborating sub-district office, and worked with civil servants on a daily basis. The senior designers – design professors or directors of design consultancies – had a less engaging role, but collaborated with junior designers and civil servants through regular meetings and workshops. This paper studied four projects recommended by the manager of the Design Consultant program, who coordinated and monitored all projects. Junior designers and civil servants of the four projects were interviewed at the workplace of each team. The interviews were conducted in an unstructured way, but included questions regarding project objectives, expected/actual outcomes of the collaboration, experienced challenges during the collaboration, and willingness to participate in similar programs in the future.

Case A: Increasing residents' sense of attachment to the neighborhood

The sub-district, located in the northeast of the city, has a number of cultural heritages and beautiful natural environment including 800-years-old ginkgo tree that is under protection by the city government and mountains. Yet, the sub-district was becoming a "bedroom town" as many residents in the sub-district spend their day in the downtown of the city for their work and leisure. To increase residents' sense of attachment to the neighborhood, and promote cultural and natural values embedded in the sub-district, the project team created a map of the neighborhood. The map is also meant to be used for a

guided tour that the sub-district office provides to newly moved-in residents to help them get familiarized with the neighborhood.

Case B: Community regeneration

The initial goal of the project was to improve physical environment of the sub-district. Yet, the focus of the project shifted towards the soft side of community development, in order to mediate communication among residents, and alleviate conflicts in the neighborhood. The project team developed a program facilitating meetings and communication among people living in the sub-district, and a design proposal to utilize unused public spaces in the neighborhood to function as community spaces where residents can meet and talk. The project team also co-designed a visual identity of the neighborhood, together with local communities.

Case C: Senior center service improvement

A local senior center in the district offers various recreational and educational programs for senior citizens, and facilities such as a gym, and a restaurant that provides healthy and affordable meals. As a growing number of senior citizens use the center, the center has encountered a number of problems, including heavy workload of social workers at the center, and conflicts among users or between users and social workers. The senior center also needs to make better use of the limited space, and maintain the service quality while accommodating more users. Based on the findings from ethnographic research and a series of workshops with social workers at the senior center, the project team developed a design scheme transforming the restaurant in the center to multi-functional space to accommodate more users. The team also developed a new service concept that invites senior citizens who are familiar with the facilities and programs of the center to help other users, especially those who visit the center for the first time.

Case D: Promoting initiatives of the sub-district office

The sub-district office has a number of initiatives to make the neighborhood socially and environmentally sustainable, ranging from a community cinema to “recyclable waste collection stations” where volunteered local residents help waste separation. The project team focused on developing communication materials to promote those initiatives in a more effective and attractive way, and to encourage more active participation from local residents. In addition, ideas of new services the sub-district office intended to offer to residents (e.g., a party for a new-born baby) were prototyped during the project.

Scaling out: Diffusing promising solutions throughout the city

The underlying strategy of the Design Consultant program is comparable to *planning by projects* (Manzini and Rizzo, 2011) or *acupuncture planning* (Jégou, 2011)

in the sense that a citywide change was fostered through a constellation of small-scale projects. Manzini and Rizzo (2011) articulated the strategy of *planning by projects* by analyzing exemplary cases – Dott07 (Designs of the Time, UK), Feeding Milan (Italy), Chongming Sustainable Community (China), Amplify (USA), and Malmö Living lab (Sweden) – which have in common that they “aim at sustainable changes on an urban/peri-urban scale” and “have been explicitly or implicitly led by design”. These projects consist of *local projects* that function as small-scale, short-term experiments, and a *framework project* that triggers, coordinates and amplifies a number of small-scale local projects “to generate sustainable changes on a larger scale” (Manzini and Rizzo, 2011, p. 210). Such strategy has been also described as *acupuncture planning* or *acupunctural approach* (Lou et al., 2013; Jégou, 2011), by using an analogy with acupuncture that “adequately stimulates the key acupoints to generate affection in the whole meridian system” (Lou et al., 2013, p. 202).

While these strategies are based on synergic impacts created by interrelated small-scale projects that lead to macro-scale impacts, the subdistrict-scale projects under the Design Consultant program are not interrelated. As each project was defined by the project team autonomously – not by the Design Consultant program – the micro projects could not be planned or coordinated to create synergic impacts. Instead, the micro projects function like independent living labs that explore and experiment different solutions to tackle various issues in the city. As the problems addressed by different micro projects were, to a varying degree, relevant issues to every district in Seoul, the solutions developed through the micro projects can be beneficial to other districts in the city. The Seoul Design Foundation plans to disseminate the outcomes of the projects to all local administrative offices and municipal organizations through internal organizational communication channels of the Seoul Metropolitan Government to foster promising solutions to be replicated to other sub-districts, which may lead to citywide impacts.

What the Design Consultant program intended to scale out is not only promising solutions to address problems in the city, but also design-led problem solving practices and collaboration with designers. Although there has been a growing interest in the potential of design-led innovation in the public sector, there is still lack of awareness about the potential of adopting design to tackle social problems. Conventionally, local authorities and public organizations in Korea tend to use design as a tool to improve style and usability of public space or service, by commissioning design agencies to accomplish predefined tasks. As design projects are usually considered as something to be “outsourced”, the relationship between designers and public partners is similar to that of service providers and clients, and public partners rarely participate in the design process. The use of design, and design process promoted by the Design Consultant program were different from the conventional ways public bodies use design, as the design process had more collaborative nature, and required more active participation and engagement from civil servants. As a matter of fact, not all projects carried out under the

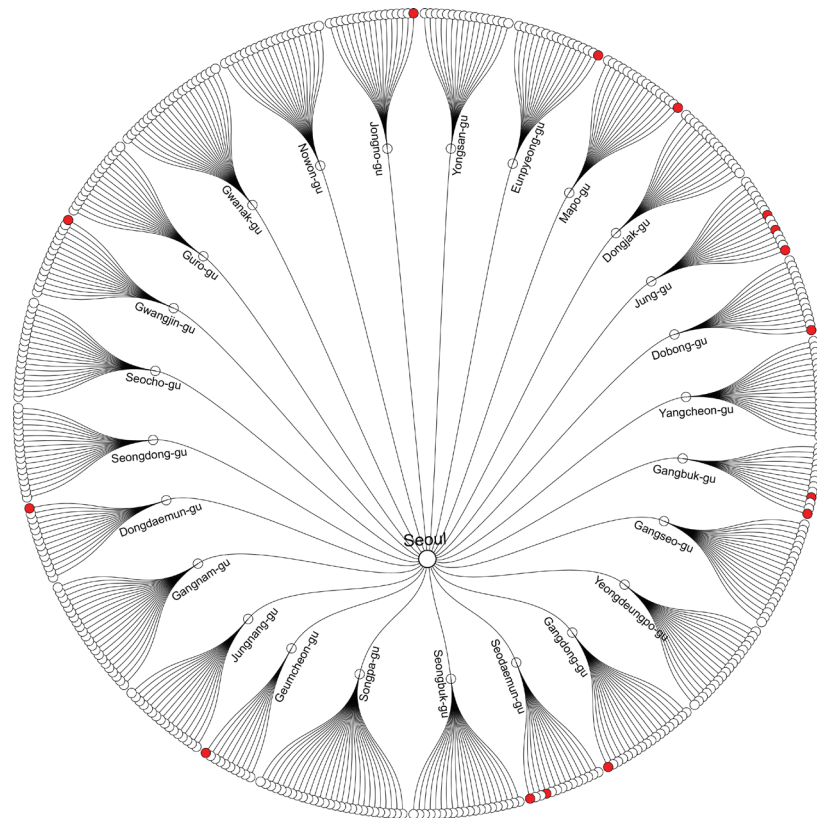


Figure 2. Seoul is divided into 25 districts (“gu” in Korean), and 424 sub-districts. The red dots in the figure indicate the 15 sub-districts that participated in the Design Consultant program.

Design Consultant program went smoothly, and some designers could not overcome the gaps with regard to the expected roles of designers in the projects. Also, daily presence of designers in the collaborating sub-district offices sometimes caused misunderstanding, since some civil servants and local communities thought the role of the designers was to do any sort of design work needed in the sub-districts. As an example, one designer was asked by a local resident to design a poster for her exhibition, because she thought the designer working in the sub-district office was supposed to serve citizens, like civil servants.

Despite some conflicts and challenges, all the civil servants who were interviewed during this study positively evaluated the collaboration with designers, and showed willingness to participate in similar programs in the future. One of them commented that the collaboration with designers was beneficial not just because of the outcomes produced through the collaboration, but also because the collaboration provided opportunities to explore problems from different angles, and to gain deeper understanding on the problems. She mentioned co-design workshops organized by the collaborating designers were particularly beneficial, even though it was quite different from what she expected from the designers. The workshops did not yield any tangible outcomes, but all participants – including her – evaluated the workshops very positively, since the workshops provided opportunities for them to share different perspectives on the problems, and collaboratively (re)define the direction of

the project. She also commented that the project broadened her understanding of “design” and the potential role of design in her work that she had not been aware of. Her main interest in the beginning of the project was to redesign signs in the senior center to make them more readable for senior citizens, but the collaboration with designers led her to explore more fundamental issues that have negative influences on the overall service quality of the senior center.

Scaling up: Synergic integration with policies and resources of the city

As the Seoul Design Foundation is a city-funded organization, it is in an advantageous position to scale up its initiatives. Its close relation with the city government also makes it easier to invite civil servants and other local stakeholders to join its program.

Westley and Antadze (2013, p. 3) differentiated “scaling up” from “scaling out” by defining the former as “efforts to connect the social innovation to opportunities (resources, policies, values) occurring in the broader economic, political, legal or cultural context”. One of the opportunities the Seoul Design Foundation recognized to scale up its program was a policy of the city government that aimed to reduce unemployment rate in the city. As the growing rate of unemployment among young citizens has become one of critical issues the city government face, creating more jobs for the young unemployed in the city has been one of key policies of the Seoul Met-

ropolitan Government. Thus, the city government has implemented a program called “New Deal”, which financially supports public organizations that create new jobs for young unemployed – age between 18 to 39 – for up to 15 months. The Seoul Design Foundation used this scheme as a way to attract young designers looking for a job to collaborate with civil servants. As the “New Deal” scheme aims to provide not only job opportunities, but also additional supports for career building of young citizens, the junior designers who participated in the Design Consultant program were offered lectures and workshops on service design, and design for social innovation. Apart from the projects they carried out with the collaborating sub-district offices, they were also invited to individually explore problems in the city and propose ideas to the city government regularly, as the intention behind the program is to nurture them to become design experts specialized in addressing social issues.

Discussion: Challenges from the perspective of designers

The interviews with junior designers who collaborated with civil servants for five months revealed a number of challenges from the perspective of designers. While the civil servants interviewed during this study showed a high level of satisfaction about the program and collaboration with designers, the designers expressed mixed feelings about the collaboration. One of the prominent challenges they pointed out was the gap of understanding on the role of design and designers. As most civil servants had a rather limited view on design, the expected role of designers during the project was often limited to improving aesthetics of communication materials or space. Although not only problem solving, but also “problem setting” is an important part of strategic design (Meroni, 2008), and one of key characteristics of transformation design – differentiated from traditional design – is designers’ involvement in the process of defining the project brief (Burns *et al.*, 2006), designers who participated in the Design Consultant program felt there was little room for them during the process of problem setting and exploration. To a considerable extent, problems to be addressed had been predefined by civil servants before the collaboration with designers. In some cases, even solutions were already defined to some extent, and designers were expected to make the solutions more attractive.

Another challenge was that innovative ideas were not always appreciated by some civil servants, since unconventional solutions were perceived by them as a “risk” that may cause troubles. One junior designer mentioned that she observed even a small change in the neighborhood could provoke complaints from residents, thus it seemed inevitable for civil servants to be cautious about trying out “unconventional” solutions. Staszowski *et al.* (2013) pointed out similar challenges based on their experience of working with a public-sector partner. They underlined that “Especially when discussing and promoting more disruptive, or transformative proposals, designers need to be aware of the unique constraints that government agencies face in exploring, entertaining, and implementing new ideas” (Staszowski *et al.*, 2013, p. 33).

Conclusion

This paper studied a case of a design program fostering collaboration between designers and civil servants to address problems in a city. The underlying strategies of the program – scaling out promising solutions developed at a sub-district level throughout the city, and scaling up the program through integration into policies and resources of the city – and challenges of design collaboration with civil servants are discussed. The study is limited in that it did not examine all projects carried out under the Design Consultant program. The lack of analysis of the effectiveness and desirability of the outcomes produced from each project is another limitation of this study. Further research on strategies and tools to overcome the challenges identified in this paper would be beneficial for designers working in the public sector.

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