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# Being a sociable designer: reimagining the role of designers in social innovation

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## ABSTRACT

The democratisation of the creative process in design and social innovation has brought the position of the designer into question. Therefore, a shift is necessary from the traditional role-based approach towards one that is value-based. This paper introduces the sociable designer, who is driven by *being* social, rather than *doing* social. Based on insights from field work conducted in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, this reorientation highlights the value of design in supporting the reconfiguration of social relationships by thinking of design as a socially-embedded practice.

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## KEYWORDS

Design and social innovation; designer role; relationships

## 1. Introduction

What is the role of the designer in social innovation when ‘everybody designs’? Manzini (2015) suggests that everybody has the ability to design, although not everyone is a competent designer and fewer still become professional designers. It does not mean that professional designers are not required, but instead they should focus their energy towards enabling social actors to take part in the co-design process. This approach requires a shift in mind- and skillset for many designers, who have the tendency to emphasise on delivering design outcomes rather than building social infrastructures (Dindler and Iversen 2014; Warwick 2017). This, alongside the continued emancipation of the ‘users’, who are increasingly assuming the role of co-creators or co-designers, entails a shift in responsibilities for designers, moving towards a role that is more facilitating and/or coordinating in nature (Catoir-Brisson et al. 2016; Cairns 2017).

In this changed landscape, where boundaries between content and context experts are blurred, it can often be challenging for designers to stay relevant and provide added value in the social innovation process. Rather than assuming another role (the designer as . . .), a reconsideration is needed of what it means to *be* a designer in the social innovation space.

The notion of *sociability*, commonly perceived as a tendency to engage in amiable social interactions, has been studied in a variety of academic disciplines, each having its own interpretation of the concept. The definition proposed by sociologist Simmel (1949), however, is (still) relevant in this context. Sociability, considered as an inherent human

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drive with no underlying motive other than the enjoyment of each other's company, operates under the assumption that the interactions between those participating are based on equality and reciprocity, making the pleasure derived from the interactions by one person contingent on that of the other(s).

Although this pure form of sociability is mostly a philosophical construct, as no human interactions are completely free of intentions and expectations, it resonates with recent propositions, such as the *intimacy* approach to design and social innovation (Akama and Yee 2016). Based on Kasulis' (2002) *integrity vs intimacy* framework, here, the notion of intimacy assumes that people are interdependent on one another as well as their respective contexts. Therefore, the knower and the known are inseparable, as knowledge itself is relational to the person and their reality.<sup>1</sup>

The intimacy approach is not a role that one adopts, as it is a way of *being*. The *sociable designer* therefore is someone who is able to transcend their professional role(s) and engages in reciprocal and mutual exchanges (Petrella, Yee, and Clarke 2020), by investing in the long-term relationships or friendships with those they engage with, even though there are no direct apparent benefits to be gained in the process.

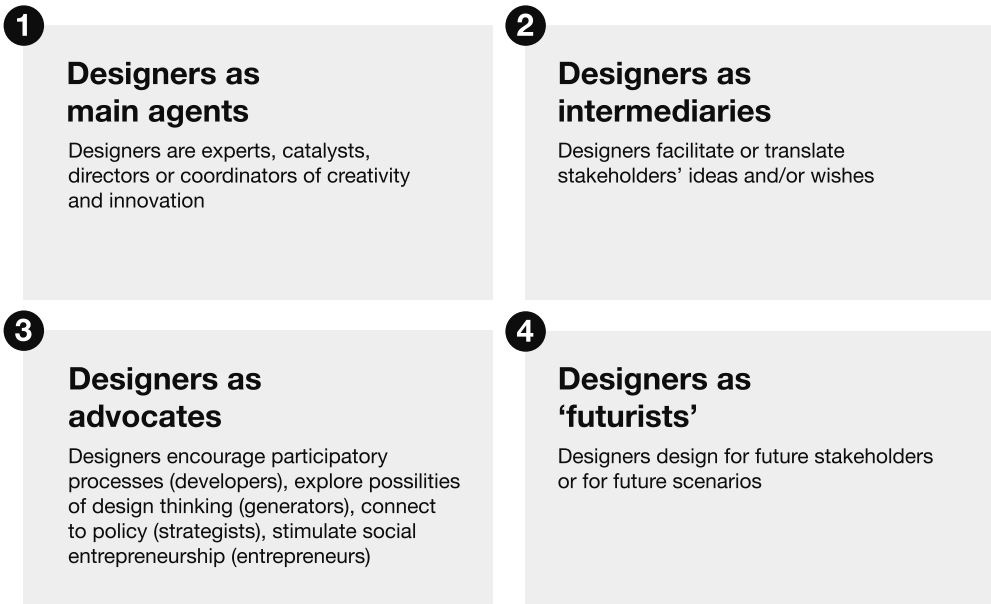
This study aims to introduce the sociable designer as a designer who has evolved and adapted themselves successfully to working in the social innovation context. The findings from this study are based on one of the three key themes identified from a broader PhD research project,<sup>2</sup> which explored what constitutes design and social innovation initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on the cities of Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur (Tjahja 2019). The PhD study aimed to determine why design and social innovation projects are initiated, for whom they create value and what role design and designers play in creating this value.

In the following sections, the traditional roles of designers in social innovation will be discussed, along with the problems that are associated with it. Next, the context and case studies are described, followed by the methods used for data collection and analysis. In conclusion, the findings will be presented, which will lead up to a characterisation of the sociable designer.

## 2. How designer roles are described in social innovation

Academic discourse on design and social innovation currently tends to emphasise two characteristics of design: design as a creative force, primarily through design thinking (Freire, Borba, and Diebold 2011; Manzini 2013; Calvo and De Rosa 2017), and design as a democratisation tool, through co-creation and co-design, inspired by the discipline of participatory design (DiSalvo et al. 2011; Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012; Cairns 2017). The position of stakeholders in these approaches has increasingly moved towards to be equal to that of designers, which has promoted the formerly 'passive' users, clients, citizens and other actors, to assume the role of active co-creators or co-designers. This alters the power dynamics in the design process, resulting in a shift in the perceived status and role of the designer.

In this regard, other researchers have identified a variety of roles that designers have adopted to reposition themselves in the social innovation space, which can be categorised into four main types (see Figure 1). The first type is the designer as a central figure or catalyst, including roles such the *design expert* (Jégou and Manzini 2008; Sanders and



**Figure 1.** Different interpretations of the role of designers in social innovation.

Stappers 2008; Manzini 2015; Cairns 2017), *coordinator* or *maestro* (Catoir-Brisson et al. 2016), *capacity builder* (Tan 2012) and *activist* (Meroni, Fassi, and Simeone 2013). Although the designerly abilities of other actors and stakeholders are (partially) recognised, in these roles the designer still occupies a privileged position, separate from the others.

The second type has a more intermediary character and includes roles such as designers as *interpreters* (Freire, Borba, and Diebold 2011) or *cultural operators* (Selloni and Corubolo 2017), translating the needs of their subjects, who are perceived to be the contextual experts. The third type positions the designer as an advocate for design in a broader context, including roles such as *developers* and *generators* (Lee 2008), *strategists* and *social entrepreneurs* (Tan 2012). The fourth type focuses on sustaining initiatives in the long-term, suggesting designers should design towards future stakeholders (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012; Chick 2012), create enabling ecosystems (Manzini 2015) or act as *provocateurs* (Tan 2012).

However, the two 'pillars' of design and social innovation, design thinking and co-creation, on which the majority of the proposed designer roles are based, have been drawn into question, as their underlying theories are still based on traditional human/object-centric, rather than situation/social-centric priorities (Janzer and Weinstein 2014). Furthermore, a large-scale study of 26 cases has shown that design thinking and co-creation in social innovation initiatives were not applied in any significant way, neither on a strategic nor operational level (Komatsu et al. 2016).

This is exacerbated by the growing criticism on the mainstream view in design and social innovation, which perceives (design) practitioners as 'culturally neutral, objective, interchangeable, and a-geographical', disregarding possible biases that designers might bring into the process (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum 2019). This is

particularly problematic when it is implicitly assumed that ideas, methods and approaches developed in the west can be seamlessly transferred into other cultural contexts (Bala-Miller, Marras, and Zacarias 2008; Manzini 2015), which might be ill-suited for the local situation (Brown and Wyatt 2010) and/or replace local, more effective, approaches (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum 2019).

Moreover, the notion of design, and therefore the role of designer, can be perceived differently than in the west. For example, in the Asia-Pacific region the value of design appears to primarily be its ability to bring economic benefits for local industry, as is apparent in Malaysia, where the Malaysian Design Council promotes the use of design in business, education and manufacturing (Malaysian Design Council 2021). The Design Council of Hong Kong and the Thailand Creativity and Design Center (TCDC) state similar objectives (Design Council of Hong Kong 2021; Thailand Creativity and Design Center 2021). The use of design in social innovation does not appear to be one of the main areas of focus in any of the three government bodies.

### 3. Reimagining the role of designers in social innovation

Recognising the challenges that the human/object-centric approach poses in design and social innovation, some authors have proposed designer roles that adopt a situation/social-centric perspective. An example is the *fraternalistic* designer, who does not lead the (co)design process, but instead assumes equal agency and responsibility as other stakeholders (Thorpe and Gamman 2011). Or the designer as a *critical friend*, a trusted person who asks questions and provides constructive criticism as if they were a friend (Warwick and Young 2016). Similarly, the designer as a *community builder* creates an open empathic environment, both mental and physical, where communities can interact and share ideas (Yee, Jefferies, and Michlewski 2017).

Although these roles acknowledge and expand upon the importance of the relational aspects in the social innovation process, the involvement of designers in social innovation should go beyond the adoption of roles, as this implies that the part played is somehow external and separate from that person. This paper therefore aims to contribute to the design and social innovation discourse by proposing a shift from the traditional role-based approach towards a more fundamental value-based approach.

### 4. Context and case studies

In order to understand the different ways in which design and designers work in social innovation, the field study was conducted in three urbanised cities in the Asia-Pacific region: Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

In Hong Kong, there has been a recent shift from social enterprises led by NGOs towards pioneering social innovation projects. In this context, the Social Innovation Enterprise (SIE) Fund acts as the government's main funding body for social innovation, mostly funding initiatives through intermediaries (SIE Fund 2021). Social innovation is also promoted by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) through the Jockey Club Design Institute for Social Innovation (JC.DISI), which combines social innovation research with practice. Since 2017, PolyU has also been offering a BA course in Social Design. Other local organisations that actively fund and/or support social innovation

initiatives in Hong Kong include the Make a Difference (MaD) organisation, the Hong Kong Arts Council, the Hong Kong Jockey Club and the St. James Settlement charity.

In Thailand, the social innovation scene is dominated by a number of large institutions. The National Innovation Agency (NIA) is a public organisation that supports and develops innovation through co-creation, networking and interdisciplinary collaboration, which it achieves through academic and financial support, among others (NIA 2021). The Thailand Social Innovation Platform, launched by the United Nations' development agency UNDP, connects local initiatives with one another, working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP Thailand 2018). With a focus on design, the government-funded Thailand Creative and Design Center (TCDC) promotes design and creative practice in Thailand. Other organisations supporting social innovation in Thailand include the School of Global Studies at Thammasat University, the global fellowship programme Ashoka and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation.

The Malaysian government supports social innovation in several ways. The Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (MaGIC) mainly focuses on technology and stimulating social entrepreneurship (Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre 2021). In addition, the government's strategic investment fund Khazanah, through its foundation Yayasan Hasanah and its subsidiary Think City, is responsible for funding a significant amount of design and innovation initiatives and projects, as the latter was originally set up to rejuvenate cities and make them more people-friendly (Khazanah 2021; Think City 2021; Yayasan Hasanah 2021). In Malaysia, there are also many active grassroots initiatives, which receive little or no support at all.

The choice for Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur was influenced by the first author's existing networks and relative familiarity with the local culture, facilitating both the access to, and cooperation from, the initiatives. In addition, special attention was given to ensure that the cities represent a diversity of ecosystems with different cultures, political structures and stages of design adoption.

In two separate field studies conducted in 2016 and 2017, two months were spent in each city, contacting initiatives, building relevant social networks and conducting interviews. In total, sixteen initiatives, five in Hong Kong, six in Thailand and five in Malaysia, were eventually selected as case studies (see Table 1 for an overview). In all three cities, similar urban initiatives were chosen in order to explore a diverse range of practices, but also to enable the identification of common features and issues being addressed. The term 'initiative' is used loosely here as the practitioners themselves often do not distinguish between an organisation, a project, an event, a body of work or all of these at the same time.

## 5. Methodology

As the actors in the design and social innovation process cannot be studied separately from their respective contexts, this study adopts a social constructionist perspective, in the sense that it assumes that social interactions construct meaning and understanding to human activity (Lock and Strong 2010) and examines these different realities and phenomena, along with their implications, definitions and experiences (Patton 2015). The case study method was therefore deemed to be appropriate, as it entails a thorough

**Table 1.** Overview of types of initiatives and respondents.

Initiative	Type	Initiated by	Respondents' backgrounds	Usage of design
<b>Hong Kong</b>				
Goodseed	Organisation	Government	Social service	Capacity building, design thinking, co-creation
DOMAT	Organisation	Architectural agency, social enterprise	Architecture	Architecture, product design
Fine Dying (SI.DLab)	Project	Non-profit social design agency	Academia & social design, product design	Design thinking, co-creation, empathy, immersion, prototyping, capacity building
Form Society	Organisation	Independent	Social design	Event organising
Play Depot	Organisation & project	Independent	Visual art	Design activities are organised by stakeholders
<b>Bangkok</b>				
Co-create Charoenkrung (TCDC)	Project	Government	Graphic design, Education, Business	Urban renewal, prototyping, visualisation, event organising
Deschooling Games	Organisation	Independent	Graphic design, Education, Engineering	Game design, event organising, co-creation
Pom Mahakan	Organisation & project	Independent	Engineering, Architecture, Graphic design	Design thinking, prototyping, co-creation, community architecture, participatory mapping
Bangkok Chinatown CROSSs	Organisation & project	Architectural agency	Architecture	Design thinking, prototyping, co-creation
	Organisation	Architectural agency	Architecture	Participatory design, architecture, prototyping, designing relations
The Rambutan	Organisation	Independent	Graphic design, visual art	Graphic design, activism
<b>Kuala Lumpur</b>				
Earth Heir	Organisation	Social enterprise	Business, International development	Product design
3nity design	Organisation	Design & branding agency	Design	Branding, graphic design, product design, strategic design
Green pocket park (POW Ideas)	Project	Architectural agency	Architecture	Architecture, art
Lorong Bandar 13 (Think City)	Project	Government	Architecture	Urban renewal, architecture, co-creation, visioning
Water Warriors & Mukim Pasangan (UM)	Project	Academia	Watershed management	Designing relations

empirical investigation of a (social) phenomenon in its own real world context and is particularly useful when the boundaries between these phenomena and their respective contexts are unclear (Yin 2018).

### 5.1. Data collection

In line with the social constructionist approach, the Activity Theory (AT) framework was chosen as framework for data collection, as it enables the study of individuals together with their contexts by studying the generated activity (Engeström 1999), describing the embedded activity structures and developments (Tarbox 2006) and can look beyond individual design methods, processes and ideas, providing insight into the initiatives

**Table 2.** Overview of themes pertaining to the role of the designer.

Reoccurring themes pertaining to the role of the designer	Cities		
	HK	BK	KL
The importance of tangible results	x	x	x
The importance of social relations in general	x	x	x
The importance of relations between stakeholders	x	x	x
The role of education	x	x	x
The role of internal and external communication	x	x	x
The creation of value	x	x	x
The perception of value	x	x	x
Raising awareness about issues	x	x	x
Building trust with the community	x	x	x
The negative perception of design(ers)	x	x	
The lack of control over the design process	x	x	
The attitude of the general population towards design(ers)	x	x	

underlying ecosystems. The data collected consisted of 23 in-depth interviews with 33 practitioners,<sup>3</sup> ranging from one to four hours per interview. These were supplemented by notes and images taken during observations at events organised by some of the initiatives as well as various printed materials, such as books and leaflets, provided by the practitioners.

## 5.2. Data analysis

Although AT can be utilised for data analysis as well, thematic analysis was selected instead, as it adopts a more structured approach. Thematic analysis can be used in a variety of epistemological positions which investigate the causes underpinning human action (King 2004). It is a method that can identify, analyse and report patterns or ‘themes’ within data, and is widely used in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke 2006). In this study, the data was approach in an inductive manner, entailing that it is presumed that the findings are a result of interactions of the analyst with the data, resulting in the identification of themes, patterns and categories (Patton 2015). Reoccurring topics from the three cities (see Table 2) were grouped into broader themes, which resulted in key themes, one of which was the role of the designer, on which this paper is based. From the key themes, the three characteristics for the social designer were distilled (see Figure 2). For purpose of this paper, we have only focused on relevant themes that have contributed to the development of the sociable designer concept.

## 6. Findings

The democratisation of the creative process, which is inevitable in design and social innovation, has eroded the traditional roles of the professional designer as central catalyst and creative mastermind. This shift has necessitated in the identification of new roles for designers to better frame their contribution. However, our findings suggest that adopting a role-based approach limits potential discourse to what it means to adopt a situation/social-centric perspective in design.



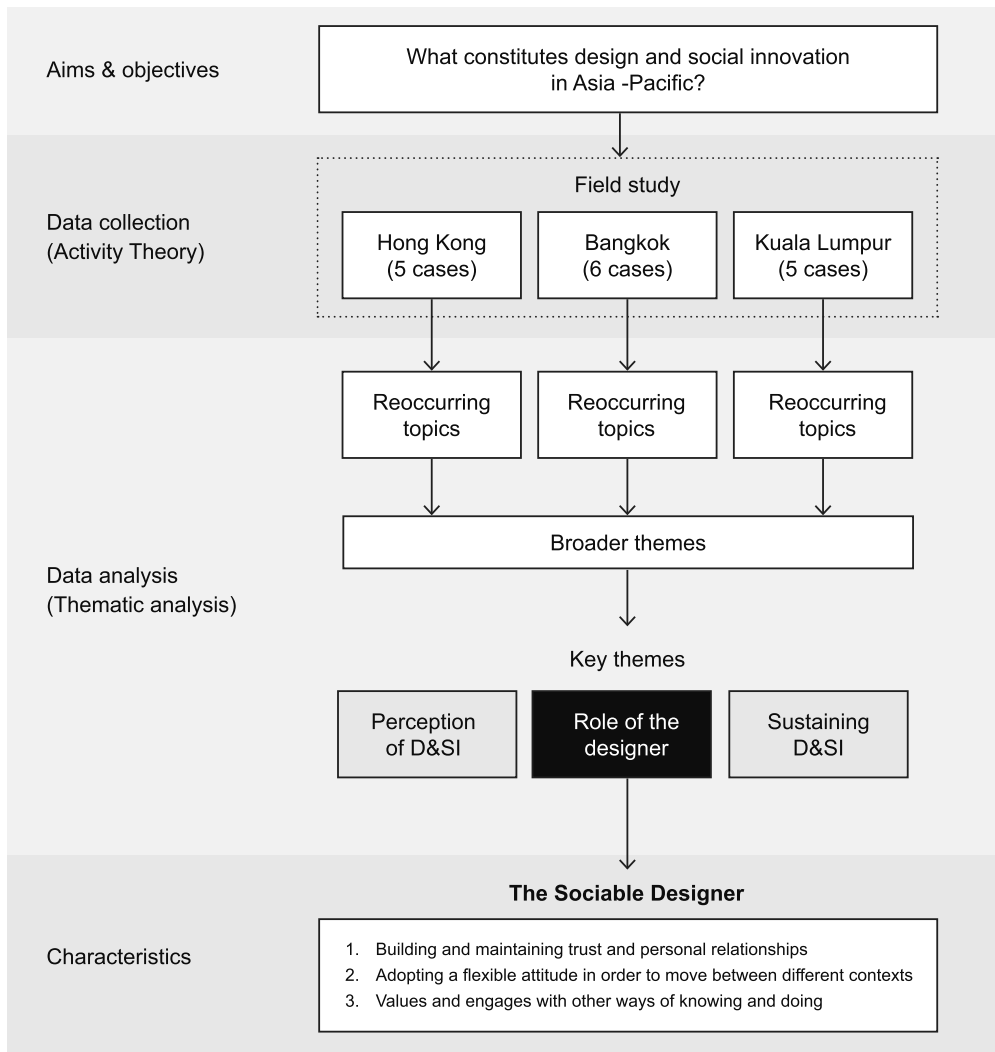


Figure 2. Methodological map.

### 6.1. Introducing the sociable designer

In order to offer an alternative to the current role-based conceptualisation of a designer, we suggest reconsidering how designers should *be*, instead of what they should *do*. In this context, the term 'social' should not only be defined as the nature of the cause or the associated activities, but instead that designers themselves, along with their personalities and mindsets, need to be social.

Informed by the findings, a sociable designer is driven by three core characteristics, which in turn are based on underlying values that are considered essential when operating in the social innovation space.

## 6.2. Building and maintaining trust and personal relationships

”[...] We like designing, but our skill is not designing from the table, our skill is to be with people, talking, sharing [...] we want to design social relations and physicality together. We took a lot of time to build trust with the people who are involved in designing.”

– A practitioner from Bangkok

The importance of building trust and maintaining healthy social relationships with partners and other stakeholders was emphasised by respondents from all three cities. The creation of trust with those involved, in particular, was perceived as one of the main activities in the process, even when this entailed getting involved in projects and activities that were not directly related to the work the practitioners originally set out to do. In some cases, maintaining good social relations with the community was perceived to be even more important than design itself. A social entrepreneur from Kuala Lumpur, for example, noted that successful collaboration with local artisans is contingent on whether they like her personally, as they do not have an obligation to work with her.

Several respondents noted the importance of appropriate communication regarding their activities, which contributes towards the upkeep of good social relations with the community. One practitioner from Kuala Lumpur actively engages and clearly communicates their intentions to local residents, stressing that they are not gaining any monetary benefit from their activities, but doing it for the greater good of the community, in order to dispel any misconceptions. Likewise, one respondent from Bangkok noted that in some cases, miscommunication can lead to a lack of understanding among the stakeholders regarding the practitioner’s intentions. This will cause them to disagree with activities proposed by the practitioner, which could delay the project.

The importance of relationships highlights the importance of adopting a relational approach to community and social innovation (Hancock 2019). In this instance, a relational approach refers to how people orientate themselves in their relationships and when working with others. This recognition of self and others, and of why you have come together to work towards a shared goal, requires practitioners to communicate their intentions to the community clearly, in order to gain their support, manage expectations and prevent ambiguous situations. The sociable designer therefore strengthens the social fabric by building and sustaining trust and long-term relationships with stakeholders and the wider community. These relationships should be meaningful as well as mutually beneficial and should take precedence over any type of design activity (Petrella, Yee, and Clarke 2020).

## 6.3. Adopting a flexible attitude in order to move between different contexts

“I’m a team member of the project, but I’m also a community member and I’m also in the committee who works with the local district office. I have many roles that I need to play.”

– A practitioner from Bangkok

Instead of adopting a specific professional role in the design and social innovation process, in several of the initiatives, practitioners often find themselves having to take on different responsibilities and tasks outside their normal professional skills. The practitioner quoted above, added that his mother is also in neighbourhood committee member, which can create interesting situations. During the day, they might collaborate with one another on a neighbourhood project as community member and designer. In the evening, however, they are mother and son, with the former telling the latter that he should work faster.

Another designer from Bangkok noted that he will adapt his contribution according to the situation. During multidisciplinary projects, this often means that he will be in charge of designing the logo or presentation, as his discipline is graphic design. However, whenever necessary he can easily switch to other activities, such as providing communication. Likewise, a practitioner from Hong Kong shared that she and her business partner often take on different responsibilities in the process as well. Occasionally, they even switch roles with one another, although they are careful to not let their activities overlap.

The fluidity of tasks, activities, and responsibilities illustrates a level of flexibility required to be embedded into the context, reflexively learn quickly from mistakes and work with what is at hand (Reitsma, Light, and Rodgers 2014; Wang, Bryan-Kinns, and Tie 2016). A designer should therefore not enter a project with a fixed idea of the role that they may play but instead have the humility to consider what's required, who is there and how they can contribute. This asset-based approach is also contingent on the trust and social relations that have been built previously. The sociable designer communicates their actions and intentions in a clear and effective manner, delivers what is expected of them and is always assessing changing requirements at all times.

#### **6.4. Valuing and engaging with other ways of knowing and doing**

“Social design has been a big trend in Hong Kong design, but when you see a lot of the projects, designers have almost 100% control over what's happening [...] Who are designers? How you can just say, 'I'm the one who knows best?' [...] There are so many other people doing amazing things and I think it's time for designers to reframe what our role is. Do we really know so much? We don't.”

– A design researcher and practitioner from Hong Kong

The reluctance of the mainstream design profession to acknowledge their contribution beyond the industrial-capitalist model has meant that some designers continue to have a narrow view of what constitutes designing. This has also resulted in a lack of acknowledgement and awareness of other ways of knowing and doing that might be more sympathetic to social innovation. Even the proposition of the *t-shaped designer* (Brown and Wyatt 2010), the *maternalistic* and *fraternalistic designer* (Thorpe and Gamman 2011) and, more recently, the *italicised t-shaped designer* (Steane, Briggs, and Yee 2020) so far were unable to significantly challenge the prevailing normative attitude from within the discipline.

In all three cities there were practitioners who shared the traditional perception of the designer as a creative expert. Interestingly, all were designers or architects themselves, which was not necessarily the case for practitioners who did not have a design background. For example, a respondent from Hong Kong remarked that the designer's role should not be emphasised, as design is only one of many approaches. It is when two different approaches to the same problem produce “fireworks”, the co-creation process can be considered as a success.

Similarly, a social entrepreneur from Bangkok with an engineering background, perceives designers as one of many professionals involved and, as the main actor in a design and social innovation initiative, engages them whenever the situation calls for it. Here, it is not the designers who are in the lead of the creative process. Instead, a ‘non-designer’ decides when designer can contribute and what their role should be.

Overcoming the traditional view of the designer's role takes courage and optimism, as well an openness to accept that designers are operating in a new space that often challenges their existing experience and knowledge. Being respectful of what is already present as well as the practices and knowledge of a locality are important starting points for a designer, and being reflexive of one's own limitations allows a designer to draw on existing assets as strengths to build on, rather than replacing them (Sheehan 2011; Reitsma et al. 2019). In this *intimacy* mode of being (Kasulis 2002), the sociable designer acknowledges the perspectives, ideas and methods of others, and values the knowledge and experiences built through an interrelatedness with others.

## 10. Discussion

The experiences shared by the practitioners in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur have underscored the importance of a more relational approach to design and social innovation. But how does a designer who wishes to operate in this space become ‘sociable’? Several approaches have been suggested in academic literature, which have also been proven successful in the authors' own practice. These include actively creating opportunities for social interaction in order to structure long-term relationships (Light and Akama 2014), establishing relationships based on mutual learning and reciprocity (Petrella, Yee, and Clarke 2020) and strengthening social cohesion in neighbourhoods before initiating any type of intervention (Gullstrom and Kort 2019).

Becoming a sociable designer begins with moving towards a socially-embedded practice. Going further than the notions of enabling ecosystems (Manzini 2015) or infrastructuring (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012), which aim to sustain initiatives by creating a favourable environment of stakeholders, a socially-embedded practice requires designers to simultaneously create and become part of the social fabric surrounding the initiative, before attempting to (co)design any type of solution, product or service.

By prioritising the social dimensions of their practice over design activity, the sociable designer focuses on *being* social, rather than *doing* social. Here, the term ‘sociable’ takes on an extended meaning compared to the original notion proposed by Simmel (1949), as it is also used to illustrate the combination of two conditions: being both *social* and *able*, the designer manoeuvres successfully and effortlessly within the social innovation space and is well-liked and well-known in the community they work in.

The sociable designer therefore needs to go further than what is expected of most of their colleagues in terms of professional commitment. By emotionally investing in their work, the sociable designer aims to build long-term relationships with the community they work with, while assuming different responsibilities and roles depending on what the situation requires of them.

For example, one day they could be facilitating a workshop, encouraging discussions and pasting post-its during a workshop with residents. After getting to know some of the residents, the same designer might attend a neighbourhood barbecue or participate in a sporting event organised by the community. A few weeks later, they develop a design prototype for the local council, whereas at a later stage they are involved as an 'ordinary' citizen, joining fellow residents for drinks after a neighbourhood meeting. Rather than parachuting in at prescribed times during the process, the sociable designer checks in regularly with the people they work alongside with, becoming part of their lives and thereby blurring the boundaries between work and private life – in a good sense.

However, it is acknowledged that it would be impossible for even the most sociable of designers to strive for 100% involvement in the community they work with, aside from certain cases when they happen to be part of the community already.<sup>4</sup> In addition, becoming too (emotionally) involved can also have unintended negative effects, such as inadvertently being caught in the middle of local politics, which can be difficult to navigate and can have unpredictable outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the sociable designer should keep a pragmatic attitude by recognising the boundaries of what they are able to achieve in the time and given the context they are operating in, while at the same time being aware of their ethical responsibilities to both their communities and themselves when entering and leaving these relationships.

We acknowledge the precarity and risk that a sociable designer is placed in by investing so much into the relationships, and suggest that designers enter into these relationships carefully and fully aware of the potential entanglements that might ensue. However, if designers follow a respectful, reciprocal and relational practice (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum 2019) that is sensitive to power dynamics, knowledge asymmetries and cultural values, it can help negate some of the more challenging aspects of these relationships. By openly and honestly communicating their aims, intentions and actions consistently throughout the collaboration, the sociable designer balances stakeholders' expectations, and whenever necessary, adjusts their behaviour or involvement accordingly. What is important, however, is not the quantity, but the quality of the effort invested.

## 11. Conclusion

This study aims to initiate a conversation in design and social innovation discourse through the study of design and social innovation practices in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur. The reimagination of the designer *being* social as opposed to the designer *doing* social was inspired by experiences shared by practitioners working in cultural contexts that tend to be more intimacy-oriented, which highlighted the importance of situation/social-centric priorities for designers. What matters most, is that designers recognise social relationships as a valid and important outcome of their work. Future research should explore how to integrate this approach in design education and how

these social structures can be maintained and expanded upon. To do so will require designers to broaden their definition of sociality, considering it not just as a condition they have to intentionally ‘design’ for, but realising that their practice, and they themselves, should be socially-embedded in the context they are operating in. Only then can design meaningfully support social innovation.

## Notes

1. In contrast, the *integrity* approach assumes that there is an independent, external set of values where the knower and the known are considered to be separate entities. Therefore, knowledge is external and can be shared and applied onto different contexts.
2. The three key themes identified were the perception of design and social innovation, the role of the designer and sustaining design and social innovation initiatives.
3. Some interviews were conducted with two or three practitioners present. In addition, two practitioners were interviewed twice over the period of one year.
4. This was the case for the Bangkok Chinatown, one of the cases in the field study. Founded by a local architect who grew up in the area, the initiative aims to improve and preserve the historic neighbourhood.
5. In another case study, numerous (design) practitioners risked their careers and reputations by trying to preserve the controversial Pom Mahakan village in Bangkok through various co-design activities. However, the municipality eventually razed the village to the ground, bringing into question whether these decades of effort were worth it in the end.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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