



The Design Journal

An International Journal for All Aspects of Design



ISSN: 1460-6925 (Print) 1756-3062 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfdj20

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To cite this article: Alayça Erözçelik & Burak Taşdizen (2017) Designing on the Spot: Learning from the Social Design Projects in Gökçeada/Imbros Island, The Design Journal, 20:sup1, S1751-S1764, DOI: [10.1080/14606925.2017.1352696](https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352696)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352696>



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Published online: 06 Sep 2017.



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DESIGNING ON THE SPOT: LEARNING FROM THE SOCIAL DESIGN PROJECTS IN GÖKÇEADA/IMBROS ISLAND

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Abstract: Design for social innovation is the emerging movement of the 21st century. Nonetheless, the socioeconomic impact of social design projects is conditional upon their multifaceted conception and upon their array of influence. In Turkey as elsewhere, sustainability is one of the main issues of social design projects in urban/rural territories. Generating innovation at the local level and for individual people also rely on design teams' persistency on penetrating on local communities' lives. This paper will focus on the design workshop series implemented on Gökçeada/ Imbros Island between 2014 and 2016. By expanding the problematics of sustainability in social design projects, the paper will propose a three years' experience with academic purposes, based on benevolent participation and unfunded co-design. Finally, this paper will aim to contribute to the social design literature by illustrating a model of "designing on the spot" concept, for the sake of sustainable, long run design projects.

Keywords: Social Innovation, Design for Development, Turkey

1. Introduction

Intervention in local development by design becomes a common tool for social innovation. The number of the social design projects in developing countries as well as in developed ones has significantly increased in the last decade. Design thinking has been willingly adopted by the promoters of such initiatives in both public and private sectors, also in NGO's. "Small, local, open and connected" as Manzini puts it, these highly diversified projects become "innovations that are both good for society and (they) enhance society's capacity to act." (Manzini, 2010).

Following Papanek(1971), Bonsiepe (2004) and Margolin (2002) who pointed out the important role of the designer in connecting the periphery with the centre, today the designer becomes an actor in building global value chains and identifying new cultural context. Therefore, design becomes of a strategic importance for creating conditions for a specific 'territory' in order to autonomously facilitate a system of innovation by integrating local shareholders' capacities.

Nonetheless, the socioeconomic impact of social design projects is conditional upon their multifaceted conception and inevitably, upon their array of influence. Sustainability for one seems to be the most difficult stage to acquire since the societal needs and behavior are in perpetual change, perhaps faster than ever before. While design methods modeled for specific communities (and their collective activities in general) try to overcome the new forms of ‘wicked problems’ and to deal with a variety of implications, they are criticized for their uneven usefulness. “They can work well for some stages of the innovation process but less so for others, and some of the weaknesses of design methods have been exposed by their application to novel fields.” (Mulgan, 2014). Furthermore, compared to urban areas with high levels of environmental awareness, it is less probable to obtain tangible, quantifiable results by means of sustainability in rural areas where societal needs are poorly identified and specific problems are overlooked, most of the time.

In Turkey, sustainability is one of the main issues of social design projects both in urban and in rural territories. Socio-cultural, economic and environmental boundaries are certainly the fundamental causes of the lack of continuity but generating innovation at the local level and for individual people also rely on design teams’ persistency on penetrating on local communities’ lives. In order to create competitive advantages social design projects need to pay more attention to local contexts (Morelli, 2007).

This paper will focus on Özyeğin University/ Istanbul Institute of Design’s (OzU/İİD) design workshop series implemented on the specific territory of Gökçeada/ Imbros Island in Turkey, between 2014 and 2016. In order to expand the problematics of sustainability in territorial social design projects, the paper will propose a three years’ experience with academic purposes, based on benevolent participation and unfunded co-design. Facilitating the emergence of a local system of innovation based on the bicultural character of Gökçeada Island is the core purpose of the workshops, with the emphasis on the island’s sustainable potential and on the traditional production of the islanders.

By following the stages of design thinking approach, the paper points out the importance of a net of relationships with local stakeholders, local workshop tutors and participants which helped the project aims to materialize, in the case of Gökçeada design workshops. Finally, this paper aims to contribute to the social design literature by illustrating the early results of “designing on the spot” approach, for the sake of sustainable, long run design projects.

2. Why Gökçeada?

With 289 km² surface and with a population of 8830, Gökçeada (formerly Imroz in Turkish and Imbros in Greek), is the largest Turkish island in the North Aegean Sea. Due to its remoteness and its population’s ethno political diversity (Turkish and Greek people living together), Gökçeada was deprived of socioeconomic development for forty years.

Meletzis (1997) and Erginsoy (2006) state that Gökçeada was a self-sufficient, fertile land with a hard working population. The major productions of the island were based on olive oil and wine making. The livestock production is still the core production as the island is the pilot area for the organic sheep production (Konyalı et al., 2004). Nevertheless, the interruption of some of the productive activities of Gökçeada in 1980’s resulted in the decrease of economic growth and in the sociocultural deterioration.

Gökçeada can be defined as an isolated entity because of its remoteness from the mainland. Therefore, the island’s sociocultural and economic structure differs from the regional neighbors’ in the mainland (Cihangir, 2013). On the other hand, the ethnic diversity of Gökçeada defines a

heterogeneous frame by means of relationality and social infrastructure. Socially and culturally heterogeneous communities living together in a remote entity is an uncommon paradigm for islands, not necessarily disadvantageous yet challenging for social and economic activities of cumulative development systems. In the case of Gökçeada, social and economic stakeholders are the integral parts of the bicultural, heterogeneous system since the most important commercial activities of the island -livestock production, agriculture and tourism (Konyalı et al. 2004) are based on local capital. Local entrepreneurs and tradesmen carry out almost all investment projects (Keskin, 2011).

Now that rural development projects and government funds are assigned for the underdeveloped areas in the Aegean territories, Gökçeada took a step forward for being a spot for ecological production both in agriculture and livestock but also for sustainable local tourism. Admittedly, rural development projects attract the attention of the islanders who are keenly interested on growth and eager to catch up with their opponents in the mainland. However, in order to achieve the goals that the governmental programs propose, the islanders first need to acquire knowledge, infrastructure and network. In other words, developing awareness and building a network of local communities, stakeholders and academia were central to start a sustainable social change.



Figure 1. Regeneration of Craft workshop students reusing fabrics to weave 'Cacala' in Zeytinliköy (2015).

3. Why design workshops?

In 2012, the first idea of the workshops emerged from a discussion between the coordinators who were already parts of the Zeytinliköy community as summer house owners but living and working at Özyeğin University in Istanbul. The fading traditions, the decrease of productive activities, the islanders' lack of aptitude to find innovative solutions to the current socioeconomic deterioration and the local authorities' operational inertia were a few topics of the discussion. Design for social innovation projects in Italy (i.e. the projects of DESIS Network of schools of design), in Morocco (Empowerment through design projects), in India (NID projects) and in Thailand (OTOP program)

triggered the idea of enhancing the society's capacity to act and to encourage local communities towards territorial development through the instrumentality of design. Understanding the local identity and the values of the territory as Nijkamp and Mignolli suggest (2001) was the primordial advantage of the project and its core discourse. Synchronized with the new national development plans assessing funds for underdeveloped territories including EU supports and the newly elected, visionary mayor's sustainable development agenda, the Gökçeada design workshops came to the fruition.

4. The first year: 2014 Gökçeada Design Workshop (Place-Direction-Directive)

In 2014, the first workshop took place in a Greek village (Zeytinliköy) and was about designing a way finding system. The lack of a way finding system on this famous village made the daily visitors' tour limited and complicated, most of them were lost in the streets or left the village without getting any information about its characteristics. Put as a design problem, three tutors and seven design students tackled the local subject and developed three solutions at the end of their research based on: getting informed, observation, documentation, ideation, visualization and presentation.

Conceived as a pilot project, the 2014 workshop was useful on many aspects.

- As it was the first interaction with local authorities and stakeholders, academic contributors and students have had the opportunity to connect with the mayor, the provincial district governor, the military officers, the village headmen and council, the businessmen, the shopkeepers, the SME's representatives, the villagers, the islanders and the tourists.
- As it was a social design project with academic background and of benevolent nature, the workshop coordinators were granted with logistic help and support of the municipality and of the village association.
- Followed by a search conference, the design solutions and the outputs of the workshop were presented to the audience above, the stakeholders had the opportunity to ask questions, to comment and to express the different problems of the island.
- The problems expressed on the search conference helped structuring the next year's workshop topics.
- The overall encouragement of the audience was a motivation to reframe the societal needs and to assess possible design interventions in the long run.
- Scenarios for the way finding system were adopted by the municipality and the village headman (the project as a whole was realized in 2016).

4.1 The outcomes of the 2014 Gökçeada design workshops

Building the net of relationships with local stakeholders, local workshop tutors and participants were central to the workshop. In fact, the most valuable outcome of the 2014 workshop was this net of relationships since both local authorities and stakeholders realized the impact of a rather small design intervention, contextually well placed and responding to a problem specific to the village.

The problems expressed during the search conference had a wide range of concern. The attendees pointed out their most urgent needs within their area of focus (preserving their cultural assets, improving their small business, attracting tourists, building up food systems etc.) and exchanged

ideas about the generic problems of Gökçeada (ferryboat transportation, illegal livestock trade, lack of mass production etc.). Thereby and ipso facto, the search conference became a platform where people from different backgrounds and villages could interact and identify their societal needs in a semiformal atmosphere.

Later on, the workshop coordinators who are primarily design educators analyzed the synergy created during the workshop and the search conference in order to shape a consistent, sustainable workshop series in Gökçeada considering its high potential for social design projects. They prioritized the tasks as:

Expanding the net of relationships; generating solutions with creative problem solving methods of design; enhancing society's capacity to act by co-working on design solutions; creating innovative processes useful to the specific area of Gökçeada and establishing a "designing on the spot" model based on reliable, sustainable partnership for a long term social change agenda.

Appadurai (2002) suggests that "Rather than emphasize the material, logistical, and economic implications of sustainability, which we all tend to do, I think we should instead begin with the question of how to design sustainable socialities.". The search conference was proof that even micro-scale design interventions could create socialities between actors if the territorial aspect of the problems was clearly defined and the design solutions were appropriate.

5. Second year: 2015 Gökçeada Design Workshops (Regeneration I)

The second year's workshops were conceived based on this territorial approach of design and were diversified accordingly. Considering that "territorial design is about generating value for a specific territory through establishing and reinforcing its identity, while revitalizing the strength of existing cultural capital in the area" (Moulaert, 2009), the main method of the workshops was to propose new models for creating value for common good with a bottom-up approach. Although the net of relationships was not fully established yet, it was clear that the conceptual tools of design could help developing theoretical, critical, historical and methodological articulations to trigger change in Gökçeada.

In 2015, four design workshops were planned for three villages in Gökçeada, with nine academic tutors from four different countries and forty students under the theme of "Regeneration". One week long workshops had specific focus points:

- Regeneration of Craft: Ethnographic research on Greek craft culture of the village. Regenerating the craft tradition, developing new craft ideas and scenarios for future souvenir shops in the village. (Zeytinliköy)
- Regeneration of Space: Mapping the existing building stock. Planning entertainment centres for touristic activities. (Dereköy)
- Regeneration of Service: Discovery of the touristic potential of the village and its environment. Scenario building based on new experiences. (Eşelek)
- Regeneration of Food: Ethnographic research on traditional cuisine. Developing new recipes and slow food approaches. (Zeytinliköy)



Figure 2. Regeneration of Service workshop tutor Gökhan Mura and his students are reviewing the new experience ideas for Eşelek.(2015)

The characteristic traits of 2015 Gökçeada design workshops can be stated as following:

Multidisciplinary: The workshops were held by academic tutors and students coming from different domains such as industrial design, architecture, communication design and gastronomy. The chosen topics were open for undergraduate and graduate students from national universities as well as abroad.

Multilingual: Two academic tutors of the workshops among nine were Greek. The generally spoken language of the interactions with the island population was Turkish. However, in the villages of Zeytinliköy and Dereköy members of the elderly Greek community preferred to communicate in Greek. Besides, one of nine tutors was English of Chinese origin and another one was Austrian. Therefore, three different languages were used simultaneously in the workshops.

Flexibility: The workshops initiated interaction between local communities and workshop participants. First interactions showed that every village has its own identity and that even the Greek communities within different villages differ from each other by means of openness to dialogue and willingness to participate. This precious information gathered from different villages guided the workshop tutors and students at an early stage of the workshops and allowed necessary shifts from the mutually agreed design methodology and program to be made. Once settled, the flexible methodology helped expanding the net of relationships in favor of participatory design.

Local support: The impact of the 2014 design workshop arose with unforeseen help and support of the local communities on many levels. The organizational planning including accommodation, transport, hosting and meetings were granted by local associations, businessmen and individuals who willingly wanted to be part of the design activities on the island.

Documentary: The continuity of the design workshops in Gökçeada has been based on the clear communication of the vision and agenda of its components, students, tutors and stakeholders. Hence, a forty-five minutes documentary movie was made with the participation of all parties, in 2015.

Benevolence: Although it is not conventional, the workshops were conducted with fully benevolent participation of volunteering coordinators, tutors, students together with the hospitality of the villagers during the workshops. For the organization of the program, creating a fast moving system was essential to carry out four parallel workshops spread out on a large area and it was possible only if the teams were operating within a friendly environment. Benevolent work and mutual willingness have helped the cause since the beginning of the workshops.



Figure 3. Regeneration of Food workshop group meeting for a renewed traditional recipe in Zeytinliköy (2015).

5.1 The outcomes of the 2015 Gökçeada design workshops

As mentioned above, four workshops were planned for 2015 yet only three were completed successfully. Regeneration of Food workshop had to be cancelled the fourth day, due to the health issues of both two tutors. The project has been announced as postponed; the attending students joined the other workshops. The flexibility of the methodology prevented the negative consequences of the sudden interruption.



Figure 4. Regeneration of Craft workshop tutor Artemis Yagou is briefing her students in Zeytinliköy (2015).

Conducting multidisciplinary workshops was a valuable experience for the tutors in the field. Penetrating in the villagers' lives, sharing their memories and learning about their problems but also being guests in their kitchen, drinking coffee together and playing with their kids were integral parts of the design process. On the other hand, students amply benefited from the experience of meeting new people, discovering a new world in rurality, understanding the circumstances of remoteness from the mainland, overcoming communication issues and dealing with the meshed relationality of the problems. They had the opportunity to discover new connections between societal, economic and physical nodes they were envired. The multiplicity of the design solutions presented at the end of the workshops was proof that students had capabilities to quickly adapt themselves to the rural communities of the island and co-work with ease to solve problems with a design driven approach.



Figure 5. Cacala making in Zeytinliköy (2015).

The workshops were a big question mark for the villagers in the beginning. Certainly, they were used to see tourists around but the idea of meeting a group of people for a completely different reason (which was solving one of 'their' problems) was new to them. Once they understood they were encouraged to not only talk but to participate to design processes, villagers took the initiative of making important remarks and surfacing their tacit knowledge. Their active participation resulted in valuable contributions.

At the end of the workshops, a search conference took place as planned. The projects were presented to a crowded, enthusiastic audience including all the stakeholders and the communities of many villages. This time, the number of problems the islanders wanted academia to solve seemed doubled. Indeed, it required a more condensed work for the workshop coordinators to keep track of all the problems and to structure next year's design workshops.

6. Third year: 2016 Gökçeada Design Workshops (Regeneration II)



Figure 6. Regeneration of Environment workshop students and tutors bonding the traditional stone wall in Eşelek (2016).

In 2016, four workshops were conducted. The shareholders' demand for applicable projects to reach physical, tangible and quantifiable results was the motivation for this year's project organizations. Nonetheless, the characteristics of the workshops remained the same: multidisciplinary, multilingual, flexible, locally supported, documented and benevolent. Some of the tutors and the students of the previous years joined the workshops to implement their projects, which sustained the good relationships with the villagers. The promotion of the workshops attracted more students than expected but the attendance was limited to forty, as the workshop organization was not ready for an exponential growth.

- Way Finding System II: Reassessment of the information and design research. Implementation of the 2014 Design Workshop's projects. (Zeytinliköy)

- Regeneration of Craft II: Qualification of the existing craft skills of local women. Generating souvenir projects using CPS methods. (Merkez/Town center)
- Regeneration of Environment: Learning the traditional techniques by a local stonemason. Bonding an Imbros style stone wall. (Eşelek)
- Regeneration of Space II: Analyzing the characteristics of the local architecture. Preparing the building survey of an old house in the central town. (Merkez/Town center)



Figure 7. Way Finding System II workshop tutor Alpay Er and his students are placing the stone elements in Zeytinliköy (2016).

6.1 The outcomes of the 2016 Gökçeada design workshops

The way finding system for Zeytinliköy designed in 2014, was realized to be used in 2016. The villagers and students co-worked to discuss about the details of the system elements.

The second craft workshop welcomed local women as students. The lack of original souvenir products with affordable prices was one of the detected problems in Gökçeada. The workshop was a creation platform for islander women who regularly attended the municipality's craft classes and who desired to generate revenue from their hobbies.

A construction workshop of the traditional Imbros (Greek) style wall was conducted. The last Greek stonemason of the island (90 years old) was invited to teach architecture students the old techniques of bonding a stone wall. Students and tutors, villagers and stonemason worked all together to build the wall, which attracts the tourists in passage. Interestingly, this wall was not built in the Greek village the stonemason comes from; the request came from a Turkish village of Yörük origin.

The fourth workshop was a renovation practice for the architecture students and the request came from the municipality. In order to have a new office for mayor in a traditional Imbros style building, the municipality needed a renovation survey.



Figure 8. Regeneration of Craft II workshop tutor Alayça Erözçelik is working on new souvenir ideas with her islander students in Merkez (2016).

7. Conclusion: Theoretical outcomes of the Gökçeada design workshops

At the end of three years' experience, the following conclusions emerged from the Gökçeada Design Workshops:

- It was possible to ensure sustainability for design workshops on a specific territory. The sustainability is closely related to the “socialities” that Appadurai mentions (2002). We can find a parallel discourse in the territorial design literature: “In order to develop and grow with territorial design, a community requires more than practical tools, this means that the design intervention is also concerned with the links, interactions and relationships between people/context/artefact, informed by the social, immaterial, and complex dimensions. The sum of this introduces the concept of connectivity.” (Mortati and Villari, 2012). This connectivity does not occur with one single intervention nor can't it be obtained in one week. It cannot be secured with a limited number of stakeholders either. Socialities and connectivity demand time, years to be precise, in order to be sustainably set and require the active participation of all parties involved.

- It was possible to adapt social design strategies developed for monocultural entities. The various examples of social design workshops realized worldwide in the last ten years have been insightful for Gökçeada design workshops. On the other hand, it was not possible to copy and paste the methodologies applied in homogeneous communities since Gökçeada has a bicultural identity if not multicultural and heterogeneous. The language issues, the differences of traditions, habits and attitudes, the introversion of the islanders and the residues of the politico-economic slowdown were stated as the boundaries to overcome. Nonetheless, it has been possible to mirror strategic steps toward societal change and merge creative problem solving methods in order to assess peculiarities and to raise impact.
- It was all about being familiar. At the end of three years of contact, the efficiency of a continuous alliance among related parties created synergy and the net of relationships expanded because the design workshops increased the awareness of social cooperation for local development in Gökçeada. The image of the same group of tutors and students designing for the island enriched the islanders' perception of the contribution of outsiders for social change.
- In a local, territorial level, even a micro-scale design intervention can trigger social change by increasing a society's awareness about design and its outputs' efficiency. Because, social design paradigm does not necessarily involve professional designers and their uninterrupted intervention in the flow of daily life. On the contrary, it is a shift of roles, designers becoming entrepreneurs (Manzini, 2010), villagers in this case looking for appropriate solutions for their local, specific issues. Furthermore, by showing the potential of creative solutions, the design workshops have encouraged the local authorities to conceptualize and accelerate rural development projects with larger budgets and bigger size, in a national level.



Figure 9. A selection of magnets from the Regeneration of Craft II workshop in Merkez (2016).

- In order to fulfil the steps mentioned earlier such as expanding the net of relationships, enhancing society's capacity to act by co-working on design solutions and creating innovative processes useful to the specific area of Gökçeada, it is necessary to state that design interventions for social innovation cannot be done from a distance or with a distant perspective. This is why establishing a "designing on the spot" model based on reliable, sustainable partnership for a long-term social change agenda was indispensable to the workshop series.
- Designing on the spot model that the project proposes is not about physically being in the territory for a short time and initiating social contacts in order to understand the local issues, resulting with impermanent solutions. This is unfortunately the case of many social design projects in Turkey; once done, they remain unsustainable. The designing on the spot model proposes the continuous interaction with the territory: developing scenarios to be realized, implementing the projects, cross checking the effectiveness of the applications, making revisions if necessary, broadening the scope of the intervention or shifting it for more tangible results, repeating the loop of the interventions with the same stakeholders and the core team, taking immediate action for a precipitate issue or for its prevention and accelerating the holistic development of a larger size. The three years' experience proves that sustainability in social design workshops depends on the tenacity of all the stakeholders and their uninterrupted dialogue for the supreme cause of social innovation.

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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank all the tutors of the workshops: Özlem Özkal, Murat Şahin, Metin Çavuş, Banu Pekol, Artemis Yagou, Gökhan Mura, Athanasios Stasinopoulos, Theresa Maria Simone, Özgür Ölçe, Maksut Aşkar, Neva Kip, Priscilla Chueng-Nainby and Özgür Göçer. They would also thank the co-coordinator of the workshops Alpay Er and Orhan Hacıhasanoğlu, the dean of OzU Faculty of Architecture and Design.