

On re-designing Okinawa-city

沖縄市の活性化のデザイン



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Last November, and as a part of the design school program, we went to Okinawa. Okinawa's sun and sea were often a wish during the cold winter days, but what could Okinawa teach us about design? The theme was ambitious: Revitalization of Okinawa-city, and more particularly a smaller area, called Koza area. We ended it up getting our sun and sea, and in addition a deeper understanding of Okinawa and a couple of lessons about design, group work and presentations.

Take advantage of the advantages...and disadvantages

The start point of our journey was a talk. We got information about Okinawa-city and Koza area: Biggest American bases, a new library that seemed very important to the heart of the municipality, the new big mall that killed the local shopping life of Koza area, the failed incentives to fill the empty spaces of the city...

After getting this information, we grabbed some colored sticky notes and colored pen and wrote down every comment we have on the topic: Positive aspects of Koza area (as much as we could find), negative aspects of Koza area, questions, etc.

Having a general idea about the current situation, we left the working space to explore Koza area. Ex shopping street and ex music town, Koza area looked more like a semi-ghost city at the time of our visit. It was a compilation of very small deserted streets, closed shutter doors, no parking spaces, unhappy shop owners. We conducted a couple of interviews with American soldiers, shop owners, visitors of the area. Our exploration phase was not restricted to the time slot reserved to it. It was more of a continuous state

that lasted during our whole stay in Okinawa. Everything around us was giving us a new input: The taxi driver, the locals we met, the visit to the big Aeon mall, etc.

We went back to the working space, added the information we got and brainstormed to get ideas to solve the problem. The ideas were numerous: Museum for Okinawa-city, Selling traditional Okinawa products as a solution for the shopping crisis, cruises to improve tourism, etc. However, no solution seemed really convincing.

And here came the question that was extremely useful in our design process. *What does Koza area have, and what it does not have?* This question allowed the re-direction of the focus while proposing ideas. We were proposing ideas to attract tourists to the beach, but Okinawa-city doesn't have the best beaches in Okinawa. Other ideas were directed towards encouraging shopping, but the very big mall that has almost the monopoly of the market and competition will be hard. Thus, those ideas were eliminated. On the other hand, the question led us to take advantage of the maximum of features that Okinawa-city offers (being a good or a bad thing). The American bases, the small streets, the closed shutter doors, the empty spaces, the empty shops, the library, the music city and the dance festival organized every year should all become beneficial to Okinawa-city. Thanks to this step, we got our solution: Transform Koza area into an artist city by taking advantage of all what it has to offer:

- A graffiti festival will be organized, inviting artists from Japan and abroad, to paint the *closed shutter doors*.
- The *empty spaces* will be filled by invited artists from around the world, becoming art residencies.
- The municipality will give incentives to fill the *empty shops* with artisans shops and art galleries.
- The *Library* will be a space for exhibition.
- An art school will be founded and will fill the narrow streets of Koza by art students, artsy cafes and bars.
- A painted bus will go around Koza.



pic.1 A walk to explore Koza

- Music and dance festivals will be organized.

Koza's shutter and wall paintings will attract tourists, Koza's artistic atmosphere will attract residents from other parts of Okinawa. Koza will then become the artistic hub of the region.

Divide to unite

Our team was the multi-cultural team of the workshop. It was composed by Japanese members from Ryukyu University, Japanese members from Kyoto University, and international students from Cambodia, China and Lebanon. Despite the fact that English was not our mother tongue, it was the language in which we (tried) to communicate. Our communication was a mixture of different accents, different English levels, different approaches to ideas and a constant translation which slowed down our work. After some struggling to figure out what will be our solution, it was time to prepare the presentation. That's when we *divided the tasks*. Some members who liked to draw took care of the posters, others designed the presentation flow, some of us looked for pictures for the presentation, the members with Photoshop skills decorated pictures of Koza streets with graffiti and wall paintings. Two people were responsible of integrating everything together and taking care of the flow of the presentation. Everyone was doing what they could do best. And it was done beautifully. We were working side by side, alone, in a group. It was one of the most productive group works I have experienced so far.



pic.2 Pictures of Koza area modified by a team member: wall painting and graffiti on shutter doors.

Think outside of the slides

Once the presentation prepared, it was time to rehearse. Here, another problem was faced. How will we communicate our idea to the public. In fact, the public was composed from members of Okinawa-city municipality, from

residents of Okinawa-city and from other students and professors of both Kyoto university and Ryukyu university. Our team was the only international team, and speaking in English meant that no one would listen to us. We decided to help the slides. So we played a scene. A scene where a very simple question would be asked in English, and where the answer would be given by the Japanese members, in Japanese. Different intonations, different characters, funny scenarios and interactions were taking place. With the help of the slides, we were understood, and that was a small success.



pic.3 Playing the scene during the presentation

I often tried to use those three lessons in my research and other workshops. Listing what we have and what we don't has often appeared to be useful because of the restrictions and limitations we set. Having less possibilities, we sometimes get more consistent ideas.

Inquiry towards studies of design

- + Can constraints help us generate better ideas? Constraints can be of different types: Time constraints, technical constraints, problem constraints. Which of them can be useful for idea generation, and how can we integrate it in the design processes?