

RSA Design & Society. *Are we the champions? Designers and the co-creation of public services* by Michael Evamy. A report on the RSA Design Directions project ACTION FOR AGE.

Could today's young designers be the people to transform tomorrow's public services? Could the much-needed revolution in services for our growing population of older people find its spark in the collaborative creativity of an emerging design generation?

The RSA's Action for Age project of 2008/09 sought answers to these questions. It set design students an extraordinary challenge: to design a service that could help to restore a sense of wellbeing to isolated older people, and to do so by engaging them in the process of design. This year, as part of a concept called Design Directions Plus, the RSA offered finalists the opportunity to include service users, providers and experts in the development of their projects – a glimpse of real-world scrutiny that in many cases was transformative. The brief demanded energy, empathy, preparation, imagination, insight and foresight, and it took students far from the familiar territory of studios, lecture theatres and conventional design practice. Computers were swapped for notebooks and voice recorders. At the end, the abilities, aspirations and awareness of some young designers were changed for good, and their proposals hold the promise of changing lives for good.

At the same time, their individual successes fail to conceal gaps in current design education. While design has powerful advocates in the reform of public services – compelling believers in, and practitioners of, the imaginative, collaborative processes of design – Action for Age revealed tension between emerging professional practice and the preparation design students currently get

Foreword

The RSA's central mission, to foster engaged, self-reliant and altruistic citizens, does not stop in middle age. The huge demographic shift taking place – more people than ever before can expect to live beyond the age of 85 – presents acute challenges for a vision of society that anticipates this phenomenon. Our student awards scheme, Design Directions, has established a firm reputation for promoting inclusive design, and has long challenged young designers to apply their skills to difficult social issues. In 2008/09 the bar was raised by a brief that asked them to propose not a product, but a service: a new way of thinking about the quality of life and aspirations of older people in response to a deep study of user experience.

Michael Evamy's report accounts for the uncommon purchase designers have on the agenda of inclusiveness and personalisation, particularly in public services. At the same time he candidly explores the shortcomings of public servants when it comes to design, and design education when it comes to services, public or otherwise. Our finalists in this award broke through the psychological barrier of 'product' design by really studying the behaviour and needs of older people. The networks they each proposed as their design solution, reflect the kinds of interaction with which the younger generation of designers are so familiar, but in analogue form, with the value of human contact at the centre.

A triangular partnership developed between the RSA, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, increasingly taking on big issues, and Glaxo-SmithKline, commercial champions of design committed to ambitious research and development. This enabled us to create an enhanced Design Directions *Plus* brief, into which we built new elements of professional mentoring and stakeholder workshops for finalists. After the final interviews, Andrew Barnett, Director of the Gulbenkian Foundation in the UK and judging panel member for the award declared that 'social innovation is what's been happening in this very room, this morning', while Lord Best, chair of the panel said 'We've really seen how design helps articulate the vision of a partnership, giving visual form to the relationships between diverse interests and groups'. One of the finalists has been rewarded with an internship at GlaxoSmithKline, while two more are participating in the Young Foundation/Gulbenkian social innovation summer school (SIX) in Lisbon in July. Others will be joining Portuguese students in a bilateral version of the stakeholder workshop as part of Experimenta, the Lisbon design biennale, in September 2009.

The RSA would like to thank the individuals and organisations who supported *Action for Age*: first and foremost the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation who sponsored the whole project and GlaxoSmithKline who sponsored the student internship award; the judging panel, chaired by Lord Best, who generously contributed their time to evaluate each of the submissions; Deborah Szebeko and her team at thinkpublic whose generous advice and creativity helped shape both the mentoring sessions and the workshops. We thank our stakeholder workshop participants for giving us the privilege of their insights: Esther Ward and Iris Dodds from the Gateshead Older People's Assembly; Christine Sheppard and Astrid Botting from the Involving Older People's Project at Age Concern Tower Hamlets; Catherine Zvegintzov, St Hilda's East Community Centre; Katharine Orellana, Research & Development Unit, Age Concern England; David Holland, Communications and Engagement Officer, Age Concern Hackney; Sister Christine Frost, Neighbours in Poplar; Hilary Simon, Director of the Southwark Pensioners Centre; Marilyn Kosa and Liz Gosiewski from the Independent Age Randall House Care Home in Surrey. Finally, thanks to all the other service users and providers who contributed to students' research and shared their views and experiences.

The RSA is working with leading design educators to ensure that Design Directions continues to feed the supply of young professionals who, while having all the formal skill and practical optimism we expect of design, are inclusive in their processes and able by their influence to help other people and communities to be resourceful.

Emily Campbell
Director of Design, RSA
July 2009

at university. In coming years, the question of how UK design education responds to opportunities in service innovation – for example the provision of services for the ageing population – will be vigorously debated. This pamphlet provides fuel for that debate.

Why older people? Why a service?

In setting a brief of this kind, Action for Age fused two issues that hold enormous significance for the future practice of design: the urgent need to address social isolation in the ageing population by developing more user-centred, inclusive services; and the growing demand for design thinking and methods to provide the lead in creating more inclusive, sustainable, meaningful public services.

No one needs to be told again that the UK population is ageing. But it is worth reminding ourselves of some of the facts.

In 2008, the Office for National Statistics reported that almost one in five of the UK's total population are of pensionable age¹, and that nearly 1.3 million people are aged 85 or over.²

In the next 15 years, says the ONS, life expectancy at birth is forecast to increase by almost seven years for women, to 88.3, and by almost nine years for men, to 86.1.³ The Government also estimates that one in five children born today can expect to live for 100 years or more.⁴

People can expect to live longer lives, but not necessarily happier ones. The figures around loneliness and isolation should give us all pause for thought. According to the ONS, about 3.5 million older people live alone. Research by Help The Aged reveals that one in ten older people always or often feel lonely,⁵ and nearly half consider the television to be their main form of company.⁶

Five per cent of older people – nearly 500,000 – leave their house once a week or less⁷ and one in six have less than weekly contact with family, friends or neighbours.⁸ The increasing pace and mobility of modern life, made possible largely by modern communications technology, has left 36 per cent of people aged over 65 feeling out of touch.⁹

The costs associated with caring for the ageing population are rising. Three quarters of NHS patients are aged 65 or over,¹⁰ and the number of people suffering from dementia, for example, is expected to reach one million by 2025.¹¹ With the balance of the UK population tipping towards those in old age, the dependence ratio of those of pensionable age to working taxpayers is rising, leaving public finances increasingly stretched.

As a society and an economy, we are in dire need of smart solutions to deliver more efficient and responsive services. 'Without radical changes, many of us are heading towards a future in which we are poorer, sicker and lonelier,' was the judgment of NESTA in *Preparing for Ageing*, a summary of research by Deloitte. 'We need new services, products and initiatives that help us to live healthier, wealthier and happier longer lives...' NESTA has called for a Government lead in kick-starting the market for products and services for older people by creating an 'innovation fund'.

1. Office for National Statistics mid-2007 Population Estimates (2008)
2. Ibid
3. Life Expectancy At Birth United Kingdom 2005–07, Office for National Statistics (2008)
4. Estimate based on Government Actuary Department 2006–based projections, www.gad.gov.uk
5. Spotlight Report 2008, Help the Aged (2008)
6. Spotlight 2006 Survey, GfK/NOP (2006)
7. Spotlight Report 2008, Help the Aged (2008)
8. Loneliness, Social Isolation and Living Alone in Later Life, C Victor et al (2003)
9. GfK/NOP Help Unite Generations (HUG) Survey for Help the Aged (2005)
10. Based on Health Development Agency Annual Report 2005
11. Research into Ageing factsheets updated from Dementia UK, LSE, King's College and Alzheimer's Society (2007)

Grants and subsidies might be part of the solution. But sustainable innovation is more dependent on getting the right processes in place. The question is, where do we look for those processes, and what kind of skills are needed to get the most out of them?

Business is looking to its own customers for inspiration. Gone are the days when customers were simply quizzed in focus groups for their preferences, or observed in tests for their behaviour in relation to a new packaging design, say, or mobile phone layout. In the years to come, they will become co-creators, drawing on their own experience to have an active input into the development of innovative products and services.

Consumer product companies such as Unilever are leading the transition towards co-creation. In its paper, *The Digital Company 2013: Freedom to collaborate*, published in 2008, the Economist Intelligence Unit predicted that more powerful technology will make customer-driven innovation commonplace by 2013.

The concept of co-creation is just as well-established in the development of services, which depend on an in-built flexibility and sensitivity to individuals' needs to a much greater extent than products. A shift towards co-creation in public services has been in the offing for a number of years. The idea that improvements in public service delivery hinge on the active involvement of users in the development process has enjoyed support at the highest levels of Government. In a speech on public services in January 2004, Prime Minister Tony Blair made his position clear: "We are starting... to understand that service users with high expectations and the power to choose and be heard are the best drivers of further improvement."

Certainly, in the field of services for older, isolated people, the message appears to have been lost. Providers have failed, in general, to embrace co-creation. "Until now," says Pamela Holmes, head of healthy ageing at Help the Aged, "it's just been a box that service providers tick if they feel that users have been involved. What we want to see is a much deeper involvement, an equal partnership, which happens much more rarely. There is a drive from the top, but seeing it in practice... it's a patchy situation."

In its 2004 report, *Home Alone: Combating isolation with older housebound people*, Demos identified the responsibility of providers as 'not simply to deliver services that meet people's physical or material needs, as assessed by a professional. Instead, it is about involving and supporting service users in 'co-producing' their own outcomes, so as to overcome loneliness in ways that they define for themselves'.

If co-creation or co-production is the way forward, then the role of involving users and eliciting meaningful insights and suggestions from them is a pivotal one. Many in business would still claim that users or customers do not know what they want, that they rely on top-down innovation to answer their needs. Co-creation, however, is founded on the belief that, with expert handling, users and customers can become the source of the most profound and powerful insights, capable of producing dramatic improvements in products and services.

Designers are one group vying for that position of co-creation champion. A new generation of service design consultancies have been making their presence felt. Engine,¹² live/work,¹³ thinkpublic,¹⁴ Participle¹⁵ and others work on projects aimed at bringing about user-centred service innovation for businesses and public sector bodies such as local authorities.

A notable example is thinkpublic's initiation of the first ever co-produced 'experience-based design' project in the NHS. This 12-month experiment combined the latest innovation thinking with established techniques from the world of design to give staff and patients at the Head and Neck Cancer Service at Luton and Dunstable Hospital insights into each other's experiences of the service, and into how they could improve the service for themselves. The project led to 43 separate improvements to the Head and Neck Cancer Service, affecting efficiency, patient safety and the overall experience of the service.

Dr Lynne Maher, head of innovation practice at the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, asked thinkpublic to get involved. She says that design thinking can help stimulate health service innovation by providing "a number of tools and techniques that are useful and successful. Most of all it includes the principle of really understanding the user's perspective and the experience of the service provided."

thinkpublic's founder Deborah Szebeko argues that 'co-design', in which service users, providers and other parties work with designers to conceive improvements and innovations, lends itself better to public sector services. "Co-design is more relevant to social challenges, where you have a lot of inputs and a lot of people who want to put something back and make things better. That is much more likely to happen when you're designing a cancer service than when you're improving a banking service, for example."

It is still early days in designers' involvement with public service innovation. According to Maher, "One of the barriers is the perception of NHS staff that designers only work with products or within fashion. Then there is a fear of new methods and change. The cost of bringing in design consultants to support work is also a barrier, as is the availability of support for those who would like to procure it. And designers sometimes struggle to enter the world of healthcare in terms of language and protocol."

Pamela Taylor from Help the Aged also thinks there's a long haul ahead. "My sense is that it is only the very forward-thinking service providers that would currently consider design as something relevant to them. On the whole, there isn't the recognition that design has something to contribute."

Raising awareness of how design can support the development of high quality services is the driver for the RSA's Action for Age project. The need for new, user-centred thinking in services for older people is acute. Action for Age would ask: Are young designers prepared for that challenge?

12. www.enginegroup.co.uk

13. www.livework.co.uk

14. www.thinkpublic.com

15. www.participle.net

Design a new service, network or other solution that would benefit older people experiencing, or vulnerable to, loneliness and isolation and that would help to improve their emotional and general wellbeing. How might you engage older people in the process of co-designing a response that would be meaningful to them? How can this process lead to more appropriately designed outcomes?

The brief stated that the format of the designed solution was flexible; it could be a service, a network, an environment, a piece of communication, an event, a new role, or it might take elements from several of these.

It asked students to present their ideas in a clear and compelling way, and suggested a number of issues that could influence wellbeing in older people and that might help students to focus their work, such as bridging the generational gap, maintaining a comfortable environment, eating well and feeling involved with the local community.

Students were also given guidance on the most important and challenging element of the project: uncovering insights from older people themselves that would give their work focus and direction. They were encouraged to find out as much as they could from older people about how and why they had become isolated, and to involve them in co-designing proposals that addressed this.

Finally, the brief recommended that students consult specialists in the field of care and social services, as well as fellow students from other fields, such as psychology or social science, who could contribute to their research.

A challenge met?

At the initial stage, all participants were expected to provide a clear statement of the problem or issue they had each identified, evidence of user research, and details of their service concept. More than 70 submissions were received – a formidable response, confounding fears that young designers might find this a remote and uninspiring assignment.

“What was great to see was how people were inspired by the brief,” says one member of the judging panel. “Some were more innovative than others but, in a way, that wasn’t important. What was important was the flush of interest from such a wide range of designers. It was something they wanted to be part of.” Perhaps the entrants also had an eye on the future employment market, and the expected growth in both public and private sector services for the growing older population.

The brief had clearly engaged students and elicited, in most cases, a serious effort in terms of research and presentation. But the dual challenge of designing a service – as opposed to an object – and

designing for an audience at the opposite end of the age spectrum had proved too great a stretch for many entrants.

A swathe of entries could be eliminated from the reckoning for a fundamental failing. Many of the industrial and product design students focused too heavily on visualising an object or device that might provide one of the touchpoints of a new service, and failed to consider the others. Friendly looking hand-held communicators were in plentiful supply, but not the services that would provide the friends that lonely, isolated older people could communicate with. This trend suggests that industrial and product design students have yet to embrace and address the service context into which many new modern products are designed to be used.

Elsewhere, though, students had got to grips with the defining aspects of ‘service’ and engaging with the potential users of their services. Some submissions were notable for the students’ reflections on the experience of spending time with older people. ‘Rewarding’ and ‘insightful and inspirational’ were how two typical students described their research process.

Some of the more promising concepts focused on community networks as the means of developing personal contact between older people, either by linking existing groups together or initiating new local networks that would become self-perpetuating. Others addressed specific social groups with shared life experiences – such as women on their own following a divorce late in life – and while not all of those solutions were as resolved as they might have been, the projects that emerged with the most mileage were those that focused their research on the needs of a specific, real neighbourhood or community. And while, for some entrants, youthful inexperience had led to rash assumptions about their older audience, others found ways to channel youthful energy into proposals that brought young and old together.

The first of the six projects eventually shortlisted was The Hub, a rural community group for older people and new parents, designed to encourage and nurture friendships across generations through a range of events and activities, and widen the social networks of older people to include younger members of their community. Katy Shields, from Norwich University College of the Arts, envisages the scheme working at a community level, and using local meeting places such as school and village halls to bring people together.

Katy drew on her own experience as a new mother and a trained community occupational therapist, during which time she met many older people in their own homes, in developing the concept. Informal conversations with older people revealed a pattern among those experiencing only low levels of loneliness: most of them enjoyed social networks that included people of different ages. With the increase in mobility of younger generations, these networks are harder to develop and sometimes only come about through involvement with something like religious groups or healthcare services.

For young families establishing themselves in new communities, meanwhile, the first few months of parenthood can also bring feelings of loneliness and isolation. For the parent at home during the day, finding friends nearby can be a challenge.

By bringing together these two groups, The Hub aims to form the same kind of community network that commonly existed before the decline of the local extended family. Members of the judging panel were struck by the intergenerational aspects of The Hub, and its insightful dovetailing of the needs and capacities of two overlooked sections of modern society.

For Katy, the Action for Age project offered a valuable chance to explore an area with which she was already familiar, but from the perspective of a designer. “Why am I interested in designing for the needs of older people? Because I am going to be one!” says Katy. “One thing I learnt to do as an occupational therapist was to stop looking at people from the perspective of their age and look at them as individuals, with their own sets of needs and aspirations.”

Knit Together, another intergenerational service idea developed by Sabrina Koelbl from Middlesex University, aims to connect older people to friends and relatives through electronic communication: email, chat services, social networking and online communities.

The scheme involves three elements: hardware, software and tuition. The hardware is supplied by a scheme for gathering unwanted secondhand computers and passing them on to participants. The software comes in the form of a free, easy-to-use operating system,

customised for older users. And the informal tuition is provided by younger relatives and friends.

“I chose the Action for Age brief because it was something new to me” says Sabrina. “The brief touched me as I read it. I thought of all the people that are sitting for hours alone, in front of a window, just staring. And I also thought of my own grandmothers and great-grandmothers.”

Sabrina based her proposal on first-hand experience of introducing her own 68 year-old grandmother to computing. On an ageing laptop, she installed Xubuntu, a free, community-developed, Linux-based operating system that includes all of the most popular day-to-day applications such as a web browser, word processing and messaging. Sabrina’s grandmother became co-designer and test subject, and with guidance from her granddaughter, soon picked up the basics of computer-based communication.

To take into account the low vision of many older users, Sabrina then developed a highly legible interface design language of large buttons, icons and friendly faces, and limited the range of functions to ‘chat’, ‘email’, ‘pictures’, ‘internet’, ‘write’, ‘calculate’ ‘play’ and ‘help’. She proposed that the operating system would be downloadable from a Knit Together website, which would also offer other forms of support.

Members of the judging panel were impressed by Sabrina’s identification of a real issue from within her own family experience, and by the concept of a low-cost, accessible scheme for getting older people online, with potential to bring together young and old. Their main concerns centred on two of the three elements that remained sketchy: where would a supply of reliable secondhand computers come from? And if the scheme relied on tuition from younger, willing friends and relatives living nearby – a scant resource, particularly for isolated older people – could it ever get off the ground?

A national members’ network and campaign called greymatters, a concept developed by Caroline Forte and Lucy Peers from Kingston University, was aimed at giving older people a voice with which to raise awareness of issues that affect them, and promoting a positive attitude among and towards the ageing community.

Based on the students’ premise that mobilising the ‘skills, knowledge and drive’ of ‘younger’ older people could help relieve the mounting pressure on public services, the campaign is aimed at the 60–70 age group. From conversations with older people at community groups and day centres around Kingston, Lucy and Caroline determined ‘the stage when people seek change, reassess life and priorities and look for a new way of life’. The campaign would encourage this group to be more active in shaping a healthy later life for themselves, as well as reach out to older people to help alleviate the isolation they feel.

Lucy and Caroline proposed marketing the greymatters network through a range of media, including advertising, direct mail, events

and a magazine, supported by sponsorship and advertising revenue from local businesses and major brands. greymatters would provide resources to local groups and businesses to support activities for older people and campaigns, while the members' network works at a local level, producing newsletters and listings of community clubs and activities.

While there was clearly work to be done on developing greymatters' business model, the judging panel was impressed by the work the two graphic design students had done on developing a brand and visual identity that would feel comfortable for an older audience. Its ambition of promoting ageing is a priority for society, and in that respect it identified a topical and highly relevant theme.

Their choice of the Action for Age project was a brave one: working with users to identify needs and solutions is a process quite outside the realm of standard graphic design education. "It was not like anything we had worked on previously," says Lucy. "It set us a huge challenge and would get us out of the studio talking to the people we would be designing for. Co-design was a new way of working for us, and we wanted to learn more about it."

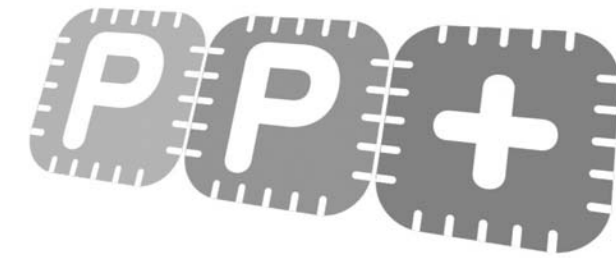
That process of user consultation made a dramatic impact on the pair, and their concept. "It was imperative for us to talk to users. That is how we got an idea of what was wanted and then, further down the line, how we tested our proposals. If the people we were designing for didn't understand what we were doing, if it didn't meet their needs, we were on the wrong track and it was back to the drawing board."

PPE: Personal Programme for the Elderly, is a scheme designed by Dimitri Merakli, University of Westminster, to encourage residents of nursing homes and residential care homes to take a more active part in organised activities, and to help shape what those activities should be.

Dimitri, another graphic and information design student, had put at the centre of his proposal a simple and familiar visual device: a month-at-a-view wall calendar that uses a series of symbols to indicate the range of activities available from week to week, and which hangs in a communal area accessible to all. Using stickers, residents vote on which activities they would like to take part in, enabling their carers to make arrangements and plan accordingly.

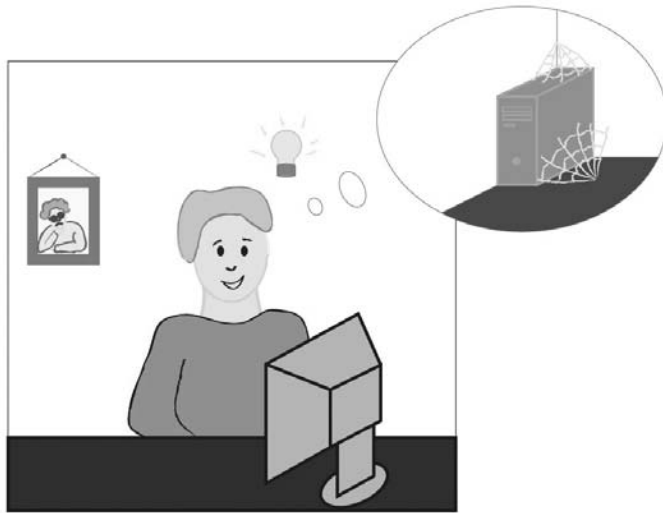
The idea has its origins in Dimitri's direct experience of care home environments. "My mum is a carer who looks after older members of the community. When I went on visits with her I realised that elderly people are not treated equally and are not valued, and I wanted to see if I could tackle these issues. I wanted to help the elderly get back in the community and make them feel part of it. I contacted [care] homes and based my project around the residents' ideas."

On the judging panel, there were discussions about the extent to which this constituted a service, but it was felt the proposal contained



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1. Project Patchwork Plus is a network employing senior community members as messengers and mediators. Winning entry by Vincenzo di Maria, Ayda Anlagan and Pu Ti, formerly Central St Martins College of Art & Design.



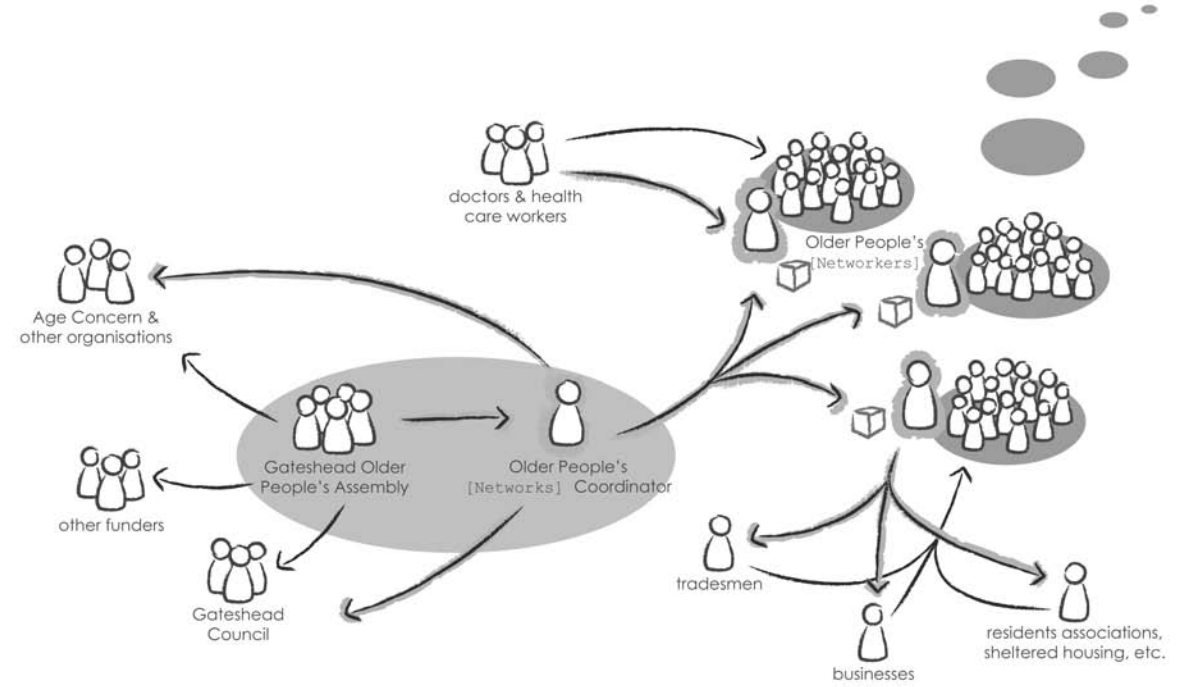
2



3

2. Knit Together is a service in which young people both refurbish used computers for use by older people and coach their seniors in how to use them. Winning entry by Sabrina Koelbl, Middlesex University.

3. greymatters is a campaign aiming to raise awareness of issues facing older people. Shortlisted entry by Caroline Forte and Lucy Peers, Kingston University.



4

4. Gateshead Community Networks' key personae are armed with a crucial tool – a box of information cards. Shortlisted entry by Rachel Deller, Northumbria University.



5



6

5. Personal Programme for the Elderly is a calendar displaying a menu of activities for older people in iconographic form. Shortlisted entry by Dimitri Merakli, University of Westminster.

6. The Hub concept brings together society's two most isolated groups: older people and new parents. Winning entry by Katy Shields, Norwich University College of the Arts.

potential for encouraging participation by people in communities as well as homes, simply by providing a single point for information about a range of activities and an easy way for older people to register their interest.

Project Patchwork Plus (PP+), the idea of a team of graduates from Central St Martins College of Art & Design, is a system that aims to make existing local services more accessible to people over 65 by collecting information about those services and delivering it to each user in the form of a monthly, personalised digest, or Patch-Pack.

This team of three, comprising Vincenzo di Maria, Ayda Anlagan and Pu Tai, wanted to overcome the perceived lack of communication between local councils, service providers and end users. They carried out their research in Hackney, a richly multicultural borough in north London, evaluating and mapping the services available there, and have modelled PP+ to operate across an area similar in size.

The key role in the system is that of the PP+ Messengers; a network (or patchwork) of local volunteers (ideally active members of the older community) who would deliver Patch-Packs to around 20 isolated older people in their neighbourhood, twice a month. On each visit, the PP+ Messengers spend time with the users and help to plan their activities and events for the next fortnight. In so doing, they also gather information about service users' lifestyles and preferences that can be fed back to a coordinating PP+ Team and put to use by the local authority and providers in planning future services.

In developing the PP+ concept, the trio of industrial design graduates consulted the local authority and local service providers, and gained access to users by volunteering to help provide services, including a Christmas lunch. That direct contact provided a focus for the project. "Without that," says Vincenzo, "and without the experience of getting involved in delivering the services, we wouldn't ever have reached an outcome."

To the judging panel, PP+ presented a strong concept grounded in thorough, focused research. Their questions centred on the issue of the number of volunteers required to make the scheme viable, and possible duplication of existing similar services.

A final year student from Northumbria University, Rachel Deller's proposal focuses on the issues faced by older people – especially men – in Gateshead, a post-industrial borough with a large ageing population, where services are struggling to cope with demand. The concept emerged from extensive discussions with users and local service providers, and the relationships forged in that process have been vital in Rachel achieving her aim of turning her proposal into a live project.

Gateshead Community [Networks] was developed in collaboration with Gateshead Older People's Assembly (GOPA), whose 1800 members

would provide a pool of volunteers to encourage and coordinate greater social engagement between older people in the community. Under the scheme, these [Networkers] receive training and support from the Assembly, and provide a point of contact and advice for people in their neighbourhood. They carry with them a toolkit, or 'box of ideas' – a set of indexed cards with information on local services, businesses, events and activities – developed by Rachel with input from occupational therapy students.

Having set out to benefit older men in Gateshead – a particularly hard-to-reach group – Rachel surveyed existing men's groups, conducted one-to-one interviews with her target demographic and worked closely with GOPA in co-designing her concept. The result is a scheme of potential benefit to the whole older community, not just socially isolated men, and the Assembly is keen to take the project forward, with Rachel's continued involvement.

The depth, breadth and focus of her research, as well as the advanced nature of her design for the volunteers' toolkit was noted by the judges. "Without involving users I would not have the level of understanding I now have," says Rachel, "and would not have had fundamental parts of my ideas questioned, and suggestions made."

"Crucially, co-design is not only about the users of a service but those delivering it, or otherwise connected to it. I learnt the most from those running successful and difficult services, as they could put the various ideas we developed into perspective. I found they were both realistic and optimistic, not simply shooting down every idea that was 'different'."

The journey and the touchpoints: *mentoring*

One week after the shortlist was decided, the six finalists attended a mentoring workshop at the offices of the leading public sector service design agency, thinkpublic, in Shoreditch, east London. Each designer or group was given the opportunity to present their proposal to staff from thinkpublic, led by the agency's founder, Deborah Szebeko, and to receive feedback on how to refine and develop it. They were also given advice on how best to present their ideas at the stakeholder workshop, which would take place three weeks later, in order to maximise the feedback from the older people and service providers that would be there.

The most common piece of advice given to students at the mentoring session was to visualise the 'journey' of their typical user, and that person's 'touchpoints' with the service before and during their use of it. How would he or she first learn about the service? What would make them want to find out more? Where could they go to access the service? Finding answers to questions like these would help to map the different elements and resources required to operate the service.

Katy Shields, whose aim with The Hub was to bring together socially isolated older people and new parents through shared events and services, was typical in needing to map the detail of how her service would work. How would The Hub be initiated within a community, and what tools would a local founder need? How would the service be marketed to appeal to both young and old? What happens at a typical weekly meeting and what kind of events would both groups enjoy?

Sabrina Koelbl was advised to focus on the service element of her Knit Together proposal to get older people online using secondhand computers and volunteer tutors. What would have to happen before a typical older person sat in front of their recycled computer, with a volunteer tutor next to them? Sabrina was advised to visualise the 'journey' of a typical user, and that of their helper, to help construct the service. Were there potential partnerships that could be set up with PC manufacturers and recyclers? And what incentives might be needed for young people to volunteer as helpers?

For Lucy Peers and Caroline Forte, the designers behind the greymatters network, the challenge became one of turning their concept from a professional-looking brand and communications campaign into an organisation or system. If it was a campaign coordinated at national level, how would it mobilise and empower groups at a local level? How would older people learn about the network and be persuaded to join it? And was the contemporary look and tone of the greymatters brand one that would win the attention and loyalty of older people?

Dimitri Merakli, creator of PPE: Personal Programme for the Elderly, was encouraged to think of his events calendar for care homes as an element in a service, rather than as an end in itself. How could

service providers be involved in the calendar's production? How might it be delivered as a service to people in the community, rather than in a care home?

The design team of Project Patchwork Plus had focused on the design of the tools for delivering the service, such as a calendar of local events. They were advised to make the scheme's volunteers, the PP+ Messengers, the focus of the service, and to make the experience a rewarding one for them in terms of widening their own social circle. This would encourage healthier older people in the community to volunteer, and help to mobilise the numbers needed to make the scheme a success.

For Rachel Deller, whose Gateshead Community [Networks] concept was at a relatively advanced stage and had already been adopted by the local older people's assembly, the main question was whether a box file carried by volunteers was the best way of delivering service information and advice to local people. Rachel's design was solid, identifiable and used a format familiar to users, but it might be expensive to produce and keep up to date. Could the information be maintained on a GCN website, for example, where volunteers could access it and print off personalised information to take with them on their visits to people in the community?

Challenging assumptions: *meeting users*

Having had three weeks following the mentoring sessions in which to refine and develop their proposals, the shortlisted students met with groups of typical stakeholders – older people and service providers – to gain feedback on their concepts. There was experience in abundance for the students to draw on, guaranteeing a day full of discussion, constructive criticism and fresh inspiration.

The quality of the proposals and presentations surprised many of the stakeholders. "I have to admit that I came to the session with a view that design was more relevant in the field of products rather than services," says Hilary Simon, director of Southwark Pensioners Centre. "But I found the students' approach to be very refreshing and innovative."

While the ideas represented a breath of fresh air, what they lacked, many stakeholders felt, was a dose of cold, harsh reality. "There were a lot of good ideas for reaching out to socially isolated older people," says Esther Ward, chair of the Gateshead Older People's Assembly, "but we felt some students could and should have consulted with more older people to understand if their project was what they would have wanted." Christine Sheppard of Age Concern Tower Hamlets, was concerned by the monocultural tenor of the presentations she saw. "I do think that it is important for designers to be aware of the ethnic and cultural diversity of communities and to reflect that in everything they present."

Katy Shields' concept of The Hub struck a chord with her group. If it kept its rural focus, she was told, it was a workable scheme. Its intergenerational qualities were endorsed and explored: was it, for example, a service that could include local schools? And ideas for events and activities that could engage both new parents and older people, such as a 'swap shop', were suggested. "Being around people that understood and liked my ideas was a great boost," says Katy, "and sent me up a steep learning curve."

The stakeholder group reviewing Knit Together were strongly supportive of Sabrina Koelbl's concept, too, reporting a high demand – and also a high level of trepidation – among older people to learn IT skills. The group explored the ideal scale of the service and whether a regional or national organisation was an appropriate vehicle, but returned to the model of the small, simple, more informal local operation as the best way to reach potential beneficiaries of the service. "The group noticed that I had missed out one of the most important questions for that project: where are the users? We also discovered the values of my project and developed new ideas for getting computers to older people."

Discussion of the greymatters concept revolved around the campaign's communications, and in particular its magazine. The group was able to offer valuable feedback about the likely preferences of older people in terms of the publication's format, design, identity and

content, but there were concerns about the concept's lack of focus on a target audience; was it relatively affluent 'younger' older people and baby boomers, or socially isolated older people living in poverty, or a group somewhere in between? "Our proposal changed quite a lot," says Lucy Peers. "We saw the holes in our project, areas that needed to be clarified and developed. We tried to simplify and make sure we really knew how our concept would work in the real world."

Dimitri Merakli's PPE: Personal Programme for the Elderly was also in need of a more defined focus. "I was given numerous issues to think about. One of the key suggestions was to design a project for a certain type of older audience rather than the whole older audience. This helped me to limit my options but it also made my project clearer."

The biggest issue for Project Patchwork Plus was the development of a business model. Funding was a vital issue, especially as the project would require considerable time and resources to mobilise the force of volunteers needed to drive the service. "We had the support of all the stakeholders," says Vincenzo di Maria, "and their suggestions helped us to focus on the really important parts of our project and refine a possible business structure to develop the project in real life."

Discussion of Rachel Deller's Gateshead Community [Networks] focused on where the volunteers at the heart of the service would come from. In times past, trusted community figures such as the local postman might have been an ideal fit for the role of bringing information and advice on services to the homes of isolated older people. Today, figures in that position of trust and confidence, familiar with the community and its members in their own homes, are harder to find. In one neighbourhood it might be a plumber, in the next a handyman, window cleaner or meals-on-wheels worker.

"The workshop challenged my own conclusions and assumptions," says Rachel. "We explored how to approach potential [Networkers], possible obstacles to reaching socially isolated people using this scheme in other regions, and how to overcome them."

Articulating the vision: *final presentations*

The students responsible for the six shortlisted projects made their final presentations to the judging panel five weeks after the stakeholder workshop.

A strong, at times passionate, commitment to the Action for Age challenge was evident in all six presentations. "We've really seen how design helps articulate the vision of a partnership, giving visual form to the relationships between diverse interests and groups," says panel chair, Lord Best.

"You got the sense that people really appreciated the challenge," says Pamela Holmes. "They found it stimulating to design for a group of people they had perhaps not thought about, or regarded as valuable and interesting, and yet found it challenging and very rewarding."

"Though the ideas were very simple, the conceptual thinking was of real quality," adds Andrew Barnett, Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. "The fact that they're not hugely complex to implement gives them the potential to be put into practice."

And there was no mistaking the distance travelled by both the entrants and their proposals since making their initial submissions. "It was really interesting to see the transformation of some of the projects," says thinkpublic's Deborah Szebeko. "Some of the weakest from the mentoring day had developed their thinking much further than the main early contenders."

The judging panel was particularly impressed by the intergenerational dimensions of Katy Shields' and Sabrina Koelbl's service concepts. "This recognition that design, when it is trying to tackle a particular challenge, can create solutions that are relevant for all, was what was most exciting," says Holmes. "The best ideas, like Katy's and Sabrina's, sprang from an individual's own experience. That makes a great starting point in a project like this, but obviously those ideas need to be developed with others to give them validity and reliability. And that's what both of them did."

In addition, the panel was impressed by the way Knit Together combined a socially sustainable strategy that was inclusive and intergenerational with an environmentally sustainable one of giving old computers a second lease of life.

Katy's presentation of The Hub, said Päivi Tahkokallio, a design and ageing specialist, "showed a strong cross-disciplinary approach and a strong commitment that sprang from the student's own experience as a young mother. But it also showed her capacity to innovate and link her experiences to relevant themes in society."

Another outstanding proposal, agreed the panel, was that of Project Patchwork Plus, for its quality of research, teamwork, presentation and development over the course of the challenge. The idea echoed that behind LinkAge, a scheme that is in its pilot stage in several areas in the UK, but, says Holmes, "those students spotted

something that was happening; they identified it through some very good research, and discovered for themselves what the challenges are.”

The good news for some of these concepts is that they are strong candidates to receive funding for further development. Says Andrew Barnett, “The fact that all three are worthy of being put into practice is a measure of the success of the Action for Age project.”

Time for change?

There is no question that there should be more challenges of this kind in design education in the coming years: projects that expose students to real social issues and real users, and to new and emerging methods of developing co-designed, user-centred solutions. On the evidence of this project, young designers certainly have the appetite, the energy and the creative resources to take on such challenges, and to emerge with proposals that contain real potential for application.

However, there is work to be done on tackling some naïve assumptions and unfounded conclusions that could have been avoided through engagement with a broader range of service users and providers. Jury member Päivi Tahkokallio echoed the views of some stakeholder workshop participants: “I would have expected a stronger interaction with social and health care professionals. This would have saved the students from inventing concepts that social care professionals have already come up with. Shortlisted students should be encouraged to interact with cross-disciplinary teams of professionals.”

Access may have been the issue: students reported difficulty in getting face-to-face with users and providers. “The main challenge was getting access to people willing to engage with the process,” says Mark Bailey, senior lecturer for the BA Design for Industry course at Northumbria University, from which more than ten students took part in the Action for Age challenge. “There was a need for CRB (Criminal Records Bureau) clearance in some cases, which takes weeks. Also, some local service providers don’t like to question their own methods. There is a silo mentality among them that protects established methods and makes it hard for them to open themselves to scrutiny.”

Socially isolated people, by definition, are isolated. I do not think I spoke to anyone who considered themselves truly isolated. The people I had access to already used services, had overcome isolation, or worked with those who can become isolated. This was still very useful, but was challenging at times. I could not test my ideas with real potential users. — Rachel Deller

How should design education respond to the new opportunities emerging for designers in the field of co-developed services? Should an annual award scheme be the only opportunity many design students will get to consider some of the biggest and most pressing issues design can address? I would argue that the skills associated with user-centred innovation are the kind that all design graduates should have a grasp of on leaving college.

Those skills are certainly in demand amongst the UK’s service sector. The new generation of service design consultancies, for example, have to look hard for the kind of young designers that can balance good, user-centred process with creative intuition.

“It is difficult to find graduates,” says thinkpublic’s Deborah Szebeko. However, degrees in service design are not the answer. “If you teach them too much service design process they become mechanical. Service design is more than good research and working well with users. The best Action for Age projects discovered human truths. Some of the students we see have amazing portfolios but their work lacks the empathy and curiosity that they need to be service designers.”

IDEO, the global industrial design firm that has rapidly extended its expertise into service design, targets ‘T-shaped people’ for its employees. According to principal Tim Brown, talking to *Fast Company* magazine: “They have a principal skill that describes the vertical leg of the T – they’re mechanical engineers or industrial designers. But they are so empathic that they can branch out into other skills, such as anthropology, and do them as well. They are able to explore insights from many different perspectives and recognise patterns of behaviour that point to a universal human need.”

The template is similar at Engine, a London-based service design agency. “Most people here have backgrounds in a design discipline,” says Nick Marsh. “There’s a real value in having a deeper skill rather than a lot of shallow ones. A service design course would be too broad.”

In the UK’s design colleges and universities, that T-shaped designer is likely to emerge from just a handful of design degree courses, where the growing correlation between the design of services and of products has been recognised. These institutions have been developing their students’ awareness of and curiosity in the service context within which so many modern products are created, and introducing them to user-centred design strategies, such as co-design, that can lead to more inclusive, user-focused solutions.

“Service design is just good design,” says Mark Bailey, senior lecturer at Northumbria University. “Like product design, it involves processes such as co-creation, research, mapping and prototyping.” Product design students that learn to use these processes can adapt quickly to the design of services. The problem is that not many students do. In other words, there is not enough good (ie user-centred) design being taught. “The good places have been doing this stuff for a long time. Design education in this country is excellent at the top end. But below that there is far too much, and some of it is not very good at all.”

The Action for Age project demonstrates that designers – even those with scant experience of the techniques professionals might use – possess attributes that any potential champions of co-creation will need, such as the ability to observe behaviours, identify weaknesses in a system and bring the perspectives of users and clients together in a solution.

Service innovation needs designers because it’s about working holistically, and looking at every aspect of what people do in their lives. — Katy Shields

Designers could be the people to lead not only the reform of our public services, but also the creation of new services and new service-oriented businesses in the private sector. But design education hasn’t realised it yet. The only courses that have are those on which thinking and problem-solving skills share equal footing with technical skills; where the ability to mobilise, capture and act on the contributions of multiple groups and disciplines, for example, is as relevant and important as an aptitude for modelling, surfacing or 3D CAD.

Product and industrial design courses run the risk of becoming irrelevant if they fail to grasp the changing nature of consumption, from objects towards experiences, and the need to give young designers the tools with which to lead innovation at both levels.

They need to start connecting more students, through work placements, with users, clients and other professions and specialists, and exposing them to the real world issues of innovation. They need to start encouraging techniques such as co-design, which are naturally, inherently inclusive and transferable between design disciplines. Put simply, they need to get their students out more, listening, looking and learning, and experiencing the messy, rewarding reality of service design.

Users are finally stopping consuming physical goods and starting to consume experiences. Service design is the future of the design market. Nevertheless, not many people teach you how to do it and only few people practice it today. — Vincenzo di Maria

Most importantly, traditional courses need to start thinking about design in much broader terms. Glasgow School of Art puts it well in its introduction to its BA Product Design course: “In order that the designers of the future are equipped not only to react to, but also to anticipate, propose and give ‘form’ to *invisible products* – such as systems, services, interactions and organisational behaviours – we need to expand the definition of the term ‘product’.”

“There is a need for traditional courses to start seeing themselves in the context of a bigger, more complex picture, and to start seeing products as part of more complex services or systems,” says Professor Alastair Macdonald of Glasgow School of Art. “The product design course here has moved significantly towards service design. The students here understand the need to be able to speak to a much wider range of people and disciplines.”

This report should signal the start of a debate about the placement of product design and service design in the same sphere of study, and for wider teaching of the user-centred, interdisciplinary design approaches that many believe lead to outcomes that are more inclusive, more sustainable and more meaningful.

The author

Michael Evamy has been writing about design since 1990, when he joined *Design* magazine. Since then he has contributed to numerous journals and newspapers, and is the author of several books, including *Logo*, a collection of the world's outstanding corporate symbols and (with Lucienne Roberts) *In Sight*, a guide to design that includes the needs of visually impaired people.

As a copywriter, Michael also works with leading design groups on brand communications for clients in the private and public sectors.

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