Partnerships for Sustainable Design in Vietnam: Leveraging Culture and Design

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Introduction and Purpose

With the geographic scattering of design, production, and markets, today’s issues of unsustainable production are at the forefront of global discussion. The speed at which emerging economies are growing around the world means that the demand for products and services will continue to increase, along with stress on the environment. The economic downturn in the West means that the attention is shifting to these emerging markets. The increasing wealth and rise of new consumers will be problematic if they also follow the unsustainable production and consumption patterns propagated and exemplified by the West. Aside from concerns for environmental sustainability, this kind of scenario is also unsustainable economically, socially, and culturally. It perpetuates the idea that the “Western” model of resource intensive consumption and production is the only and “correct” model that marginalizes and exploits a large part of the world’s population and “suggests the uninteresting scenario of a global society flattened on the Western countries’ consumption models” (Thomas 2006). In consideration of a future in which “humans and other life will flourish on Earth forever” (Ehrenfeld 2008), this scenario threatens the sustainability of people, profit, planet and culture (Bruntland 1987; Reubens 2010; “Culture and Sustainable Development” 2009). Targeting the approach towards design has the potential to tackle these issues of sustainability directly at the sites of production and new consumer markets. Vietnam is one such place that currently serves as a major production center for global markets but is not known for its design. In particular, this work may help emerging economies leapfrog past wasteful practices in meeting growing demand (Hart & Milstein 1999) in a holistically sustainable way.

One reason that Vietnam has difficulty shifting its economy from production to design is that there is limited local knowledge on how to tap into the opportunity to design for the needs of the emerging local market; this gap was identified in previous experiences in Vietnam. This includes how to add value to products through design or innovation. Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) today are still mostly exporting commodity goods, producing cut-make-trim products and competing on cost, despite literature that suggests that marketing and differentiation strategy rather than technology are the key competitive advantages for SMEs. Propagation of “copy” culture does not develop skills of design practitioners nor does it motivate producers to improve product development to standard of branded products (Kovacevic 2011). Many SMEs are export-oriented and, because of this, they are not involved in added value activities like design and branding; they are producers, not designers for export markets. It is unsustainable for the Vietnamese to compete solely in unskilled labor, because increased economic development means that labor costs are rapidly rising. Design will play an important role as Vietnam necessarily moves from exporting commodities to developing branded products (Trinh 2007). Knowledge on
how to develop sustainable products and visions is needed to make the necessary shift from production to design in a sustainable direction for both local and export markets. Future Living Studio is a pilot study created to explore how to leverage design and design thinking to create sustainable products and visions for both local and global contexts. As mentioned above, global design and production centers are split; with new markets rising at the sites of current production centers, i.e. emerging markets, there is opportunity for mutual learning and cross-cultural exchange to reach these new user groups and address global issues of sustainability on both scales of product and vision. The creation of the studio pursues an unprecedented opportunity to introduce sustainable design and practices to producers and designers with insight into the local culture. These stakeholders are of interest to involve, because they understand the local context and can help sidestep Vietnam’s problems of relatively low consumer awareness of sustainability issues and lack of strategic knowledge.

This introduction has briefly discussed the opportunities for design collaboration to tackle issues of sustainable production and consumption in the context of Vietnam as an emerging economy. In Vietnam, producers must learn to design in order to stay competitive, and there is a huge opportunity to capitalize on rapidly emerging local markets. Outside design consultants that help in developing products are rarely sustainable in the long run because the designer only provides short-term design and market inputs and not the skills and know-how of how locals can take over this process; in the long run, companies involved can start declining after the project ends because the whole process is usually dependent on outside support (Thomas, 2006). This contributes to the need for a holistic approach to sustainability, an approach that fosters local know-how and empowerment to take over the change process. The findings from this study will give insight in how to foster cross-cultural collaboration that in turn affects the holistic sustainability of Vietnam. Taking a cue from Insider-Outsider (I/O) theory (Bartunek & Louis 1996; Lockhart 1982; Crocker 2004), local and external designers become co-inquirers in the change process. The findings from this study will give insight in how to foster cross-cultural collaboration that in turn affects the holistic sustainability of Vietnam. Taking a cue from Insider-Outsider (I/O) theory (Bartunek & Louis 1996; Lockhart 1982; Crocker 2004), local and external designers become co-inquirers in the design for sustainability process. Capitalizing on the team’s diversity can promote innovation, and this study aims to identify some of the key considerations for successful and sustainable collaboration.

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss the preliminary results of a case study exploring how to enable cross-cultural collaboration in Vietnam towards sustainable design to answer the research question: how can design and cross-cultural collaboration be leveraged to promote sustainable design in emerging economy contexts? This paper presents the empirical results of a diary study supplemented by observations, to explore the sub-research questions: (1) what strengths and opportunities do relative design and cultural positionalities bring to the team, and (2) what are the opportunities to improve knowledge exchange on design and sustainability in a cross-cultural setting?

**Design and Method**

The informant-diaries were analyzed from a cultural insider-outsider (I/O), design background, and vision on design positionalities perspective. I/O theory posits that everyone is simultaneously an insider or outsider on many levels and in many ways (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). Positionality is defined here as characteristics of an individual that influence all aspects of interaction with others such as gender, age, class, etc. For example, positionality can grant or deny access to different aspects of a culture or society. Understanding and being able to leverage the different positionalities can help enable I/O teams, because the availability of different perspectives, interpretations, and conjectures, is directly linked to how innovative the team can be; “the deliberate and extensive harnessing of multiple, diverse perspectives to the task of inquiring...can substantially enhance contributions to knowledge and practice” (Crocker 2004). A positionalities approach is used as a lens to examine the collaboration because of its inclusive and critical nature (Merriam et al 2010).

FLS is a 6-month, cross-cultural, and experimental design studio in Vietnam that works with local SMEs to come up with sustainable products inspired by, designed in, and made in Vietnam. FLS brings together different levels of stakeholders: six designers in a cross-cultural design team (3 VN, 2 NL, 1 USA), five local SMEs in handicraft and furniture, the larger funding project, and the wider network of producers and designers in Vietnam and elsewhere. The project tries to leverage these three main levels of mutual learning on sustainable design: between the design team members, between design team and participating SMEs, and between participating SMEs.

The team was composed of three local designers and three foreign designers. The team composition is explained to better highlight the relative positionality of team members. Two local designers were students in their final year of product design from the University of Architecture in Ho Chi Minh City; one had additional experience working as a designer in a local furniture company. The third local designer was a long time architect and lecturer. All had some experience working in cross-cultural contexts. Out of the foreign designers, two were Dutch and one was Asian-American. Two already worked as freelance designers, and one was a recent graduate.
Of the three external designers, two were educated in product design at a Technical University and one from a Design Academy. All had some cross-cultural experience through travel or working in cross-cultural teams on the University level. Of the team, one local designer and one foreign designer were male.

The designers were sensitized to the general goal of the project: to explore cross-cultural collaboration with local SMEs on sustainable product innovation. The structure, process, and content of the project were deliberately left vague after a brief sensitization period on the project. Ethnographic methods were used to study the cross-cultural collaboration between team members and project stakeholders. The case study evidence included participant observation, field notes, informant-diaries, design artifacts, and interviews.

The results of the informant-diaries supplemented by participant observations are presented below. The diary method is a good tool for investigating change process over time and to get information on an individual level (Niall et al. 2003). This is additionally useful in cross-cultural settings to understand the different viewpoints brought by diverse cultural backgrounds. The participant-designers were asked to submit diaries daily in an interval-contingent design, where single days are the units of analysis. Participants were asked to record what they found interesting or remarkable during the day and especially on cross-cultural collaboration. They typed entries up daily and emailed them for collection on a blog platform. The diaries were then analyzed with the following questions in mind: (1) what strengths and opportunities do relative design and cultural positionalities bring to the team, and (2) what are the opportunities to improve knowledge exchange on design and sustainability in a cross-cultural setting? These questions were answered by examining dynamics of positionality, representation and power revealed in the diaries.

Results

The analysis revealed three main sites where knowledge exchange and mutual learning can be leveraged; these are: diversity in cultural perspectives, design backgrounds, and design perspectives. Exposing and leveraging these diverse positionalities had the potential to bring strengths and opportunities back to the group.

Cultural Insiders-Outsiders

The status of each designer as a relative insider or outsider to Vietnamese culture brought different strengths and opportunities to the team. The local designers brought (1) sensitivity and understanding of the local context, (2) the right to be critical of intervention process and results, and (3) were working with a long-term orientation in the local context. The foreign designers brought (1) new ideas, (2) could cause critical reflection in locals through their questioning of norms, and (3) outside opportunity structures due to their orientation.

Firstly, the local designers brought valuable knowledge and insight to the team on communication with local stakeholders such as company directors or local project partners. They mitigated the ignorance of the foreign designers by offering different interpretations and understandings of actions, events, and agreements made; they understood the subtext and could gage the extent of understanding reached by local parties. For example, on several occasions, the foreign half of the team believed that mutual understanding had been reached between company and design team, but the Vietnamese designers expressed later that the directors had taken away a different understanding of the meeting results, or had not understood design team point of view at all. When the foreign part of the team could not understand the way of thinking or judgments of local parties, because of the different normative assumptions involved, local designers could clarify via their own interpretations. Additionally, information communicated in English and Vietnamese was not necessarily consistent. One director expressed in English that he did not want to bring a prototype to a review because he was afraid the prototype was not good enough to show. However, in Vietnamese, he communicated that he was afraid the other companies would copy his design. The directors felt they could communicate more frankly and honestly in Vietnamese than in English. Many concerns were related back to the team through formal and informal communication in Vietnamese. Age and gender also played a role in communication to outside stakeholders. One designer was an older man in his 40s and acted as a bridge between company directors and the team; he could communicate as a relative equal to the directors and facilitated more informal socializing between company directors and the design team. In comparison, the two other local designers were both viewed as “students” by the company directors. Though it had been explicitly communicated that all team members were equal, the directors still expressed unhappiness in being directly called by “junior” members of the team. Because Vietnamese society is very hierarchical, it was difficult for the younger designers to be treated as and communicate as equals to company directors or even the older local designer. As a final note, one outside designer was uniquely situated as a relative insider in comparison to the Dutch designers. As an Asian-American, she could relate to issues of communication. For example, she expresses frustration when the other foreign designers can’t accept the fact that the workers at a craft village misinterpreted their design drawings:
“To me that is sort of an expected thing - you are in a different culture, and communication is one key aspect that should not be taken for granted. Even things like drawings hold meanings, but only in a group of people who understand it, like in over-processed Western production…”

This sentiment shows that relative insiders can also mediate a more sympathetic approach. In conclusion, both relative and absolute insiders can mediate communication between stakeholders. Secondly, local designers could understand the history, context, and taste of the local culture. On the product level they had the potential to connect their own, and the group’s designs back to cultural or local relevance and move designs from mere pastiche to more authentic expression. The problem of pastiche is that it is empty of history, and “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (Jameson 1991). This was a trap that especially the Dutch designers were prone fall into and were unaware of. They would bring random inspiration from Vietnam into their designs without eliciting real feedback from their local counterparts. Knowledge and inspiration from design philosophy, motifs, and forms could be shared as starting points for mutual design exploration. On the Vietnamese user or market level, local designers could be the ones to take the lead on user and market research to connect these inputs to the design process.

Finally, as a part of the local community, the Vietnamese designers had more of a “right” to evaluate and criticize the group’s process and intervention within the context of Vietnam, because they are Vietnamese and are invested in the future of Vietnam in a real sense. This feeling of commitment to give back to the community is expressed by one designer, “how about compare/consider the designs with the requirement of the hotel about the atmosphere, style, want, do the designs suit the space, the emotion we want to bring? I want to put more ‘Vietnam’ into designs.” Another designer expresses her concern on the rapid development of Phu Quoc Island writing, “I know this island is developing to become one of VN top attractions…however, how to keep the progression parallel the preservation is a riddle…This must be a big part of the “story of sustainability”…these things must be taken in consideration and must reflect precisely the features of the island, not be apart from the natural conditions.”

These kinds of reflections were expressed by local designers through the diaries, or revealed in one-on-one conversations. There is opportunity to bring these wishes and visions more explicitly into the team.

The strengths the external designers brought to the team as outsiders were that they could act as mirrors to reflect back at their local counterparts, and that they could bring new ideas and new opportunity structures into the group. For example, the external designers were inspired by mundane objects such as brooms, ladders and baskets. This caused a local designer to reflect, “the thing I felt very funny [about] is the chair-ladder [concept]. To us Vietnamese the ladder and the chair shape like that were very normal and nothing more, but you guys thought it was cool. Seems like [one] man’s rubbish is another man’s treasure.” This example shows how the external designer’s fascination acted as a mirror for a local designer to reflect on her assumptions of “trash,” while also bringing in the new idea of recombining two mundane objects: chair and ladder. This example illustrates the opportunity to leverage the marginal stance between these two intersecting ideas, to bring value back into mundane objects through new combinations and design. Finally, the external designers opened up outside privilege structures to the group. Though the external designers were relatively young, their elevated outsider, expert, or privileged status allowed the whole team to circumvent Vietnamese hierarchy to collaborate on a more equal level with company directors. But this exposed underlying discrimination faced by Vietnamese designers, and the preferential treatment of foreign designers. One Vietnamese designer writes:

“The elephant in the room now is how people treat Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese differently, what’s worse was it happens from both sides…some companies treated us nicer if we came there with at least one Western designer…[foreign designer] gave me the same vibe about being white was superior; so I really appreciate and respect anyone doesn’t have this dogma.”

These underlying issues of inequality, respect, and power dynamics between local/foreign parties undermined the spirit of the collaboration. Because of the assumed “expert” role of the external designers, they both received preferential treatment from project partners and had undue influence on the process and result of the project in comparison to their local counterparts.

In conclusion, the mixed team of local and foreign designers brought in different strengths and opportunities as cultural insiders or outsiders. The local designers were in a crucial position to mediate communication between design team and other project stakeholders, cement the project firmly in the local context, and bring legitimacy to the project by their virtue of their being invested in the future of Vietnam. These strengths could have been capitalized on better; the local designers had their own goals, thoughts, criticisms, and ways of doing things they but they found it hard to express these back to the group; these were mostly exposed in the diaries and through informal conversations. From the external perspective, cultural outsiders could bring in new ideas and opportunity structures to the team as well as act as a mirror for exposing tacit norms or understandings.
However, some of the opportunities brought to the group by the outsiders exposed underlying inequalities and structures of discrimination undermining the project’s goals.

**Design Background**

The second area that could be leveraged was the availability of diverse design backgrounds in terms of education and experience. Different design educations contribute to the vocabulary, values and practices of different designers as well as the cognitive tools such as methods they can draw from and bring to the group. Design education provides different cognitive methods and physical skills for viewing, enabling or enacting design. Design experience can refer to experience in for example, conceptualizing, facilitating, sketching, model making, prototyping, working in a team, and working in industry. These types of knowledge were exchanged both formally and informally within the team. Four levels of knowledge exchange for mutual learning and reflection were identified and used to categorize learning within the team: active-to-receptive, active-to-active facilitated, and active-to-active negotiated, receptive-to-receptive. Each of these modes involved either active or passive reflection. These four different modes and their implications will be discussed in detail below.

In the active-to-receptive mode, designers transferred knowledge to each other in teaching and learning roles either explicitly or implicitly. For instance, at the beginning of the project, the designers presented themselves and different aspects of design in their country. Upon observing the method one designer used to present herself, another designer wrote, “I was like: “wow!” when seeing the way she used pictures to illustrate her likes, her favorite tastes, sounds, images…I’ve never seen someone using this method before to introduce themself… I learned a new thing and [I will] maybe apply it in the future.” Another designer reflected on the content of one designer’s presentation on Vietnam, “I was especially surprised by the part about Vietnamese culture and the positive and negative aspects of it. I’m not sure if I could make a detailed and critical analysis about Dutch society like that…” Designers also learned from each other through learning-by-observing. One designer had expertise in negotiating with clients about design decisions. The others present write, “[the client] was always [saying, ‘no, this is hard’ from the beginning…[but she] was really good at bargaining and persuading him to compromise the best solution possible for us…” and, “working and dealing with them is like negotiation. Then I realize only one who has stable mind and strong basic of knowledge can do this. Because you need to know clearly want you want, what you can get rid of…” In this mode, designers passively learned and reflected by extrapolating out method or content. In the informal mode of active-to-receptive, tacit design knowledge was transferred to team members through their participation as observers. Formal methods of active-to-receptive were found to be a good ways of getting out individual viewpoints, but are time intensive and require a very clear brief. In informal exchanges it was important that the same people weren’t always in an active role and that they were open step into a receiving role. Otherwise, it affected power relations within the team and would favor certain viewpoints over others.

The active-to-active facilitated mode exchanged knowledge in two directions between facilitator/initiator and participants. Active-to-active facilitated activities include activities related to creative facilitation and workshops. For example, at least one designer would initiate a shared activity that would engage other designers as active contributors. This mode of engagement was actively reflexive; both parties had to participate in thinking and reflecting during these activities. For example, one designer designed and implemented a mid-project feedback workshop to explicitly get out the individual goals and to give each other constructive comments on strengths and points for improvement. The feedback about this activity was very positive. One designer writes, “[the comments about my strengths surprised me…I don’t know anything about my strengths. It leads me to the feeling of inferiority…but at least I can clear away some dissatisfaction and disappointment [that made me stuck].” Another designer expresses that the feedback session was valuable saying, “I was very happy with the feedback I got, both the compliments and the critique. It feels like a gift, I’m definitely keeping those little sheets to read over now and then…” This kind of mediated approach allowed for active participation and reflection in a participatory, inclusive and positive way that encouraged open and constructive dialogue between team members. Because the activities were facilitated, team members that participated could concentrate on content rather than both content and process. Finally, external designers always facilitated this mode of exchange because they understood the method and tools for implementing such activities; that the initiative always came from one side contributed to power differences between team members.

In active-to-active negotiated mode, knowledge was exchanged when designers directly worked together on specific tasks; these activities could include brainstorming, group discussion, planning, or carrying out tasks in pairs. Though these activities were ostensibly democratic in nature, they didn’t necessarily support how local designers wanted to communicate. One designer reflects on how she couldn’t communicate in discussion writing, “the ideas just couldn’t come out to be contributed. In other way, I totally had no idea…I felt like everything they said was reasonable…but I just couldn’t think up anything as good as them.” A counter example
was her reaction to a paper switching brainstorm exercise. She wrote, “I liked it very much, the way we switched and tried to redesign, modify other’s sketches and were inspired by previous ideas. I love looking the papers full of sketches and going round to “enjoy” and vote for each one. The eyes had a really good chance to write all ideas into the brain as they are inspirations/experiences for something later.” Working together with different expectations took a flexible approach. One designer writes, “my idea was to have a large collection of random pictures to show that people make different associations, but unfortunately [she] had made a huge collection of hotel images. It’s one of those things you just have to accept and be flexible in: and on the whole it didn’t matter that much.” These examples illustrate how different ways of bringing in input can enable or disable individual contribution to the group, and that working with other people with different experience requires a flexible approach. In general, the strength of the active-active negotiated approach was that the process involved active dialogue between group members to negotiate design process and ideas.

The last mode of exchange was receptive-to-receptive. In this mode knowledge is exchanged through one-on-one informal conversations and discussions within and outside of the studio. This was a good way to exchange thoughts and ideas both directly and indirectly related to the project in an open and more informal way. This mode was the most comfortable way of exchanging knowledge especially for the Vietnamese designers. One designer remarks, “when you ask them a bit more privately they are very accurate and critical. In a group discussion less so, but I’m glad they’re honest and to the point when you ask them directly.” Informal discussions also built rapport amongst team members. For example, one designer wrote about informal one-on-one coffee time to reflect on the project, “We grabbed coffee at a place Mon showed me and [discussed] the project scope, organization, group dynamics, concepts, you name it. It is good to be honest about these things...” This form of communication was the most equal form of exchange out of the four modes. Both parties could exchange knowledge freely and honestly, to give and to receive input. One drawback was that this form of exchange is focused between individuals and does not necessarily feed back into the group unless one or both parties explicitly brings the knowledge share back into the group.

In summary, this section discussed four modes of design knowledge and skill exchange between designers and the design team. These modes were active-receptive, active-active facilitated, active-active negotiated, and receptive-receptive. Each of these different modes afforded different strengths and opportunities for improving knowledge exchange. The active-receptive mode was strong in that it could draw out individual perspectives formally, and it could draw out tacit knowledge about design informally. The active-active facilitated mode was a team process that could draw out individual views in a team setting. The strengths of this approach are that it is participatory and inclusive causing active participation and reflection amongst team members; the amount of inclusivity is however dependent on the setup of the workshop and skill of the facilitator. The active-active negotiated approach requires a flexible and open approach to compromise on how to complete tasks within the team. The way input is elicited in this mode can affect inclusivity and representation of individual points of view. The final mode, receptive-receptive was the most equal way of exchanging knowledge because both parties are open to learning and contributing; this was also the way the local designers preferred exchanging knowledge. But, because these exchanges happen on an informal and individual level, the insights exchanged must be brought back into the team. On a final note, different levels of design education and design experience played a big role in how individual designers perceived themselves, were perceived, and how well their ideas were represented back to the group. In the first two modes of knowledge exchange, the external designers played a dominant role in exposing their expertise. In the active-receptive mode, they more often than not, played the active role as “expert.” In the active-active facilitated mode, the external designers were the ones with knowledge on how to design, organize and facilitate workshops. They could involve designers that weren’t familiar with the methods as “learners” in this process, but only to a certain extent. Though all designers were educated in design, the foreign designers had more systematic design educations in comparison to the local designers; accordingly they had a wider view on the scope of design and they had more methods available with which to enable their design and collaboration process. This allowed them to contribute more easily to the design process and also made them more dominant in steering the design process.

Point of View on Design, Power and Representation

The last site of knowledge exchange that could be leveraged was point of view on design. Point of view on design was related to normative views about goals, process, method and results of design. All designers have values and perspectives regarding design that are formed by their respective backgrounds, education and experiences. Whether these individual views were represented within the team depended on if individual designers cared strongly about certain aspects of the team process, and if they felt enabled to share these views.

All designers have values and perspectives regarding design, but the focus and level of abstraction could be different, leading to conflict and negotiation of priorities. The foreign designers tended to have diverse but strong
normative views on design that they tried to advocate and integrate into the group’s design process. This is linked strongly to the disciplinary roots of their respective design educations. Education is normative, espousing different underlying beliefs, for example about the scope, focus, process, methods, and goals of design. For example, they had strong views related to what constituted sustainable design, what the focus of design should be, and what traits good designers should embody. This led to moments of conflict or critical reflection when different and competing views came head to head; this resulted in the marginalization of less strongly or eloquently articulated points of views. One pervasive conflict within the team was on how important a vision was. One designer writes,

“In the beginning, I hoped that constructing a vision about the interaction and the feel…would help to get ‘all noses in the same direction.’ A coherent vision would be the standard to judge the individual products by, a measure to say why any of our products fits or doesn’t fit…However, only two us were interested in this. [He] doesn’t understand or see the necessity, the Vietnamese people didn’t understand enough and [the other local designer] took off on his own track.”

She and another designer had the same view on vision, but the other external designer viewed vision as something that emerged from designing and interacting with material. After their views came head to head in a conflict before a review, one designer reflects on their discussion writing, “[he] says he sees more and more that we have completely different processes. He thinks that the vision/story is bogging me down too much from actually designing, because I am ‘making things complicated.’” In the end, this conflict was resolved through working through their differences one-on-one; she writes, “we ended on a good note, feeling a lot better about how we will represent ourselves on Thursday and how to get there…I am glad he is here, though he may still need time to see the method behind my madness and post-its.” This example shows several different things: seemingly strong and incompatible views on how to enact design can come into conflict with each other; there is no “right” way to do design; compromise can be reached through conflict and negotiation; the assumption that local designers aren’t able to contribute to the development of a vision; one designer broke out of the team process to work on his own, because he didn’t understand or didn’t see the value in what was happening in the team process.

In this previous example, two points of view on design are represented back to the team through conflict and negotiation. Other points of view on design are not represented because other designers either didn’t care enough about the topic at hand or did care about the topic but did not know how to relate these values back to the design process or did not feel the authority to contribute their opinions on the matter. As the project involves a team process, all individual goals and viewpoints should be taken into consideration when developing group goals and processes. The group goal should be negotiated from individual design goals. Furthermore, all designers should be sensitized to the importance of these goals within the team process so they can be enabled to contribute as these are adjusted and renegotiated during the teamwork process.

Discussing or not, and to what extent individual viewpoints on design were brought to the team depended on if individuals felt able to express their opinions. This was linked to issues of power arising from the team dynamics, where power can refer to agency, or the ability to do something. Theoretically the design team was hierarchically equally; all designers had a right to evaluate and critique the group’s process and results. However, the amount of representation of different views, process, and goals within the group were dependent on power dynamics within the team. For example, it was found that design knowledge was valued higher within the team than local or cultural knowledge. Furthermore, some types of design knowledge or skills were valued higher than others, e.g. prototyping skills versus creative facilitation skills. These valuations alternately hindered or enabled individuals to contribute their perspectives to the team. There is an opportunity to enable and support designers to share their knowledge and skills if there is a greater emphasis on respect, mutual learning, and the legitimacy of different viewpoints.

Discussion

Because the context of FLS is sustainable design and production in Vietnam, the individual cultural backgrounds and design backgrounds (educational backgrounds, experiences, interests, and perspectives on design) brought by each group member made them relative insiders or outsiders to different aspects of culture or design practice. Understanding and leveraging the different positionalities within the design team can help enable the team. Going back to I/O theory, team diversity is directly linked to the diversity in perspectives, interpretations and conjectures available, and the higher the diversity, the more robust the theorizing can be (Crocker 2004). The strengths that different positionalities brought to the team were apparent, but leveraging these perspectives did not happen automatically. Though there were many diverse perspectives regarding culture and design, the analysis of these three opportunity areas for leverage revealed recurrent themes of unequal power and representation. For example, local knowledge was implicitly valued less by the team compared to design knowledge, or certain types of design knowledge were valued more highly than others.
In order to enable the team to harness and leverage their strength in diversity, a facilitated approach is proposed. This facilitated approach should pay careful attention to enabling positive team dynamics with emphasis on equality, mutual learning, respect, inclusivity and reflexivity. Equality, respect, and orientation towards mutual learning can be supported through communicating project norms through for example, a code of behavior/expectation prior to the project start, and then reinforced through sensitizing activities. Secondly, the I/O team needs to develop a shared mission that legitimizes differences between group and subgroup goals (Bartunek & Louis 1996; Lockhart 1982). This can be accomplished through a combination of facilitated knowledge exchange activities; insights can be taken from the results of the diary study. However, the facilitation should be external to the design team so that all designers can participate as equal contributors. Inclusivity can be built into the project through formal mechanisms that support the preferred ways different cultural orientations want to communicate their ideas back to the team. Next, because individual and team goals are constantly being negotiated, an inclusive approach to emerging process and content is needed. As Sultana says, “we need to recognize that differences in power, knowledges, and truth claims are constantly negotiated” (Sultana 2007). Reflexivity can to be built into the facilitation structure through feedback mechanisms during the process.

Reflection on Diary Method
The main drawbacks of the informant-diary method are that it is dependent on participant response, and it is a burden on participants (Niall et al. 2003). One designer did not write any diaries during the whole period. When asked about it, he responded that he did not like using the computer, and that it was too difficult to write in English. Another designers also complained about digital submission. She wrote her entries by hand and then typed and emailed them. At the beginning of the project, participants responded regularly, but over time people stopped writing. This happened especially when things became busy at the studio, for example before a review. As the project progressed, fewer entries were submitted and over longer intervals. However, despite the difficulties around the collection of diaries, they reveal a lot of interesting information. In this study, the informant-diary method revealed differing topics of concern to participants, interpretations of the same events, and insight into their way of thinking. Because participants knew they were being observed, the diary method was also a way of elaborating on or explaining their actions, or to give feedback on the project process. This is especially helpful shedding insight in a cross-cultural context where the thoughts and interpretations of group members can be very different for the same event.

Conclusions
This paper discussed the preliminary results of a diary study conducted within a larger case study on cross-cultural I/O design team collaboration for sustainable design in the emerging economy of Vietnam. The findings from the study confirmed propositions from I/O theory that diverse perspectives, interpretations and conjectures have the potential to be leveraged for greater knowledge gains. The findings from the study also illustrated how knowledge exchange can be hindered or enabled in the local context of Vietnam. There is an opportunity to introduce participatory approaches from design, to mediate teamwork within a cross-cultural I/O team. By focusing on promoting equality, mutual learning, respect, inclusivity and reflexivity on the level of team dynamics, process and result can be negotiated, inclusive and emergent.

References


